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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

THE CAVERN MYSTERY

NICK CLIMBED UP FROM THE SUB-CAVERN ROOM WITH THE FAINTING GIRL AND PLACED HER SAFELY ON THE LANDING WITH THE TWO RESCUED CHILDREN

NICK CARTER

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REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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The Cavern Mystery;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S PUZZLE OF THE LEATHER BAG.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A SECRET OF THE CAVERN.

Nick Carter halted abruptly, arrested in his forward progress by the sound of a human voice in that strange place where he had confidently supposed there was no other human being than himself at that time; and, strangest of all strange things, it was the voice of a woman, or a girl, singing.

He bent his head to listen for a repetition of the sound, for the song had evidently come to an end, even as he had caught the sound of it.

He was, at the moment, in the depths of a cavern which he had been exploring; a cavern that had been gouged out, inch by inch, through countless years and centuries, by the action of dripping water which sometimes gained the proportions of a flowing stream; and, at times when the spring thaws and the autumn rains came on, developed into a torrent of rushing power, of almost irresistible force. But we will have more to say about the cavern later.*

Instantly, when the detective heard that voice, all thought of the purpose that had taken him there vanished. The idea of mere exploration was put aside at once, for he knew that the voice he had heard did not proceed from outside the cavern, since it would have been impossible that he should have heard it in that case—and he did not suppose that there was a place left inside it large enough to contain a fair-sized dog into which he had not already peered.

Yet he knew, positively, that he had heard the voice of a woman, or a girl, singing; and he was equally well convinced that it must have sounded from some point beneath the surface of the ground, and back from the face of the cliff—in other words, from some hidden

*The discovery of this cavern, the resort of a band of kidnapers, is described in the preceding issue of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, entitled "The Secret Entrance."

space inside those caverned walls which he had not yet discovered.

That any other person than himself should be there at that time was unbelievable of itself, but that a woman, or a girl, could be there, and engaged in singing, of all things, was inconceivable.

He waited and listened, standing stock-still in his tracks, but he waited and listened fruitlessly.

No further sound of the singing came to him; all was as silent as the proverbial grave, and the detective was as much alone again, in the depths of the cliff along the west bank of the Hudson, as he had imagined himself to be before the air of that melancholy song reached his ears.

He asked himself if he should call out to the person who had been singing, and so announce his presence there, and was in doubt whether to do so or not; there was only one reason why he should do so, and a dozen why it might be better not to do so.

The entrance to the cavern—the secret entrance, as it had been called—was a cleverly contrived arrangement which gave access through the face of the cliff, overlooking the river, about thirty feet below the top, and more than a hundred feet from the bottom of it.

There, at an aperture which long ago had been blasted through the wall of the cliff, a heavy door had been constructed which would lower from the top, into a platform which extended out over the abyss below, and there was a scientifically constructed iron ladder, worked on the principle of a telescope, which was shot upward by the same mechanism that lowered the platform door, and down which those who had made use of the cavern could enter it.

Also, through a hollow tree in the woods, an eighth of a mile or more away, there was another entrance, which had been rarely used; and between the two entrances Nick Carter had, that day, explored every nook and cranny—or, at least, he supposed he had.

The cavern was merely the result of natural causes and time.

The formation of the rock in that neighborhood was slate, mostly, and, like all slate, intermixed with blue clay.

Some convulsion of nature, in the long ago, had ripped a slight fissure through the slate formation, into which water from a brook, back on the hills, had found its way.

Through countless ages this had washed and washed its way farther and farther along, moving little particles of the slate, and disintegrating and dissolving portions of the clay until, at last, this spacious cavern was the result.

In some places, where the water had been held in check, roomy spaces had been carved and worn from the rock by its action; in other places, where the rock had been harder, there was barely sufficient room for a person to squeeze through; and in other places there were points where there had not been room for the body of a man to pass, and these had been dug out with picks and blasted out with powder.

From one entrance to the other Nick Carter had, that day, explored thoroughly.

He had seated himself near the secret entrance through the cliff, where he could look out over the river and smoke; and then he had started back once more, for a last look over the place before leaving it, and had gone about halfway from the cliff entrance to that one through the hollow tree, when his progress was arrested by the sound of the singing.

That, with one word more, is the introduction to this story.

The one other paragraph is merely to state that the cave had been discovered by the detective while he was in search of two kidnaped children, Carmino and Lucia Sabino by name.

When the sound of singing reached the ears of the detective, he was standing in the middle of the most spacious of all the cavernous rooms of that strange place.

A small rivulet of water trickled through the center of it—barely of sufficient volume to have filled an eighth-inch pipe, had the entire quantity of it been directed into one.

The detective had taken with him that day, for his exploration purposes, an acetylene lamp with a powerful reflector.

True it was heavy, and difficult to carry; but it had the advantage of producing a very brilliant light, and he could fix it to the wall of the cavern and light up a region far ahead of him, while he explored, and then move the lamp onward and repeat the performance; and that had been his method.

Just at that moment the lamp stood upon a shelf of the rock behind him—that is, toward the cliff over the river, and he was looking through the cavern in a northwesterly direction.

He listened in utter silence for a long time, and then his eyes roved around the place, through the corridor ahead of him, and along the walls on either side, and thence to the almost smooth floor along which the tiny stream trickled its way.

His glance followed the stream from a point near his feet to the extent of his vision, and after a moment of studying it he uttered a low whistle of astonishment.

He had found something that had not attracted his notice before, and he went forward rapidly, half a dozen paces, to make sure that he was right.

"Yes," he decided, "there is no doubt of it."

The remark, made mentally to himself, meant that he had discovered that there was nearly double the volume of water in the stream at a point thirty feet northwest from where he had been standing when he heard the singing; but, it must be remembered that even the double volume of the water rendered the stream still so slight that it was not remarkable that it had not attracted him.

The difference between the amount of water that it will take to fill an eighth-inch pipe and a quarter-inch pipe is very small, when that water is spread out over a flat surface.

Then, when he went the rest of the distance to the point where the volume of water became appreciably less, he discovered why it was so.

Some of the water escaped beneath flakes or layers of the slate.

He returned to the eastern extremity of the cavernous room and examined the water there, but found that it had not increased again in volume; and so, it followed, that the amount of it which disappeared at the other point did not reappear.

The conclusion was obvious.

The water had to go somewhere. If Nick had not overheard the sound of the singing and had, nevertheless, discovered the difference in the volume of flowing water, he would have attributed the lesser degree of it to a mere seeping process through the rocks, which were full of seams; but now—well, it suggested that there might be another cavernous opening, not unlike the one in which he was standing beneath that very point, or near it.

The voice he had heard was there somewhere; and where that voice sounded there was a woman, or a girl; there could not be the slightest doubt of that.

This was only the second day following the one of the capture of the kidnapers, so if there had been other prisoners than the two Sabino children in the cavern at that time, they would not have starved, although there had been time to become very hungry, indeed—much too hungry, Nick thought, for such prisoners to sing, unless the beginning of starvation had produced dementia.

But he was convinced that some one was there, somewhere, and he knew that it was his duty to find that person, whether she was another stolen child or a confederate of the gang of kidnapers who had made their headquarters in the cavern.

He seated himself upon a rock to think it out; to reason it out.

He recalled how expert a mechanic the founder of that place, after its original discovery, must have been; he remembered how scientifically the secret entrance through the cliff had been constructed; and he reasoned that one who could accomplish such things could also have manufactured another secret and closed doorway inside the cavern, to some hidden storeroom, or place of concealment within it.

That side of the cavernous room where he was seated—the northerly side of it—was lower than the other one.

Where the tiny stream flowed through it there was a depression in the almost flat rock. Beyond the stream toward the south a section of the flat slate was unbroken, and it was considerably higher.

"There is a room or a hollow place under this one," he said to himself, aloud. "More than likely the way to it is under that rock. I'll look."

He was seated upon a projecting rock at the side of the cavern. He started from it to his feet, hastily reaching up his right hand as he did so to grasp another jutting piece of slate to steady himself—and the ends of his fingers touched something that was metallic.

Standing upon tiptoe, he looked behind the shelf he had touched, and he found there a large ring made of bronze, and big enough to thrust his hand through it, if he had tried to do so; but he did not. Instead, finding that the ring was fastened to a copper chain, he grasped it and pulled, steadily but firmly; and the chain came toward him as he pulled upon it, and he could hear, from behind where he stood, the grating noise of some heavy substance moving.

He knew then that he had discovered another secret of the cavern.

CHAPTER II.

THREE MYSTERIES IN ONE.

The detective half turned about, as he pulled upon the ring and chain, and he could see the flat rock toward which his attention had been attracted rising from the floor of the cavern, and thus revealing an opening beneath it.

And then he found an explanation for the presence of an iron hook in the floor of the cavern at that side, nearly beneath the shelf behind which the ring and chain had been hidden from his view.

He had not understood before why it was there, but now he knew that it had been placed there to hold the ring and chain taut when they should have been pulled out to the full extent.

When, at last, he fastened the ring upon the hook and turned about, he discovered that the flat rock that he had noticed had been raised so that it was nearly upright, and that, although the rock itself was nearly square, the hole beneath it was nearly round and was rather larger than the head of a sugar barrel.

Not a sound came to him, and he did not approach the hole at once.

He stood where he was waiting; and then, as no sound came to him, he called out:

"Who is down there? Answer me."

A gasping cry, partly of terror, partly of astonishment, reached his ears; that was all.

"I heard the sound of some one singing," said Nick, after a short pause. "Answer me. Who is down in that black hole?"

"We are down here," a timid voice replied; and even in the spoken tones of it Nick believed he recognized the voice of the girl who had been singing.

He stepped quickly to the edge of the hole and peered downward; and then he uttered an exclamation of astonishment, for he saw three persons instead of one; three persons, two of whom were tiny enough, reckoned by the size of grown-ups—and the third one, who had her arms around the other two as if to shield them from any possible harm, seemed to be almost a child herself.

"Wait," said Nick. "I'll get you up out of there in a jiffy. "You need not be afraid. I am a friend, and I am here to rescue you."

For reply, possibly produced by the reaction of long-endured terror, the two children burst into wailing, and the girl who stood—or, rather, crouched—with her arms around them, tried to hush them; and Nick could hear her saying, in Italian:

"Be quiet, little ones. You will be taken home to mamma and papa now. He is not one of the bad men who brought you here, and who have whipped you when you made a noise;" and the children stilled their sobs and looked upward at Nick with their great, round, black eyes filled with unshed tears.

"How does one get down into that black hole?" Nick asked; and the girl, looking up at him and studying him for a moment in silence, replied:

"There is a ladder down here which they compelled me to put up for them, whenever it was necessary; but usually they did not come down at all, and would not permit us to go up to them, either."

"Will you get it, please?" Nick asked.

She put the children aside gently, although they still tried to cling to her, and after a moment she raised, with difficulty, one end of a ladder toward the detective; and he stretched himself upon the floor of the cavern and reached down through the opening for it.

"Wait now," he said. "I will come down and bring the children up. They are too small to climb out, aren't they?"

But he did not wait for a reply. He ran down the ladder, seized both of the little ones in his strong arms, and hastened with them to the top.

"Now stand there," he said to them, "until I go down after your sister;" and the two huddled close together while he went again into the hole beneath the rock.

The girl had fainted away.

She was lying at full length upon her back, on the floor of that subcavern room, and Nick raised her in his arms and carried her to the top of the ladder.

Then he took off his coat and made a pillow of it and forced a few drops from a half-filled bottle of red wine that he had found among the provisions that had been left in the cavern by the kidnapers.

In the meantime, the children began to cry again, and rather loudly, and he reached out his arms and took hold of them and drew them close to him, dirty as they were; he patted them on the back and spoke softly and soothingly to them in Italian, so that presently they looked up at him and smiled with confidence; for he had whispered to them that he would soon take them back to their papa and mamma.

And then, when he looked around again, he found that the girl had opened her big eyes and was staring at him silently.

"You shall tell me all about it presently," he said; "but you look hungry; are you?" He spoke in Italian again, so the children would understand what he was saying; and the elder one of the two, a girl, cried out:

"Maria has not eaten. She would eat nothing. She made us eat all there was, and she had nothing for herself."

Without waiting to hear more the detective ran to the place where the kidnapers had kept their provisions;

and he brought back with him such food as he could find that was ready to be eaten—bread and butter, some cake, and some sardines, and a dish of cold macaroni that had been left over; also a pot half filled with cold coffee.

He watched the girl in silence while she ate, and she ate ravenously at first, although after a moment she controlled herself, ashamed of her eagerness, and peered at him shyly while she continued to satisfy her hunger.

But the two children had less care for their manners, and attacked the food like hungry cub wolves.

Nick saw that the girl, who had starved herself for the sake of the children, was not only rarely beautiful, but that she was much older than he had at first supposed; also, that the clothing she had on, although soiled and torn, and badly wrinkled, was of fine texture and was fashionably made and trimmed. Plainly she belonged to a much higher walk in life than the two children whom he had rescued with her.

But he felt that he could wait for the information that he knew she would give to him presently; he did not care to hurry her.

"I heard you singing," he said. "That is what attracted my attention to you; but for that song—or, really, only the very last bars of a song—that I heard, I would have gone on my way, never suspecting that there were prisoners here, and you would have been left to starve." He spoke in English this time.

"I had given up all hope of rescue," she told him calmly.

"You had no food down there?" he asked, pointing.

"No. The children ate the last there was many hours ago, and they had begun to cry with hunger. It was to try to comfort them that I tried to sing."

"When had you eaten food last?" he asked.

"When the people who were holding us as prisoners here sent down the last that they gave to us," she replied. "I do not know when that was, only that it was very long ago; many, many hours."

"Three days nearly," said Nick.

"It seems like a week," she replied, smiling at him for the first time, and so, lighting up her face wonderfully; then, the smile fading, she added: "It has been terrible, down in that black hole, with no light."

"No light? Did you have no light?"

"We had one until—oh, I cannot figure time, sir; but it was many hours ago when the last candle we had burned out, and there was no more light. It seems like years to me."

"I haven't a doubt of it. How long have you been there?"

"The children have been there with me only a short time; rather less than a week, I believe, although it may really be more than that. I do not know exactly."

"How long have you been in this place, young woman?"

She smiled wanly before she replied; then she said: "I cannot tell you how long a time it is, but I can give you the date when I was first brought here. I have no idea what date it is now."

"That will answer very well, then."

"I was brought to this place the fourth day of July," she said simply.

Nick uttered an exclamation of genuine astonishment.

"What?" he demanded. "Are you sure about the date?"

"Yes. Quite so. I am positive. That is the day, is it not, when your people in this country celebrate your independence? The day when boys fire pistols and make hideous noises and build bonfires in the evening?"

"Yes; that is the day; but you speak as if you were much too familiar with this country to be forced to ask such a question as that. You speak English perfectly."

"Yes; but I learned it in England, not in the United States. I learned it at school at first, and then in England—in London. I arrived in this country in the morning of the same day that I was brought to this place, sir."

"How old are you?" Nick asked abruptly.

"I shall be twenty-one my next birthday, which——"

"Twenty-one? You do not look that much, by—well, by at least three or four years."

"That, perhaps, is because my hair is braided down my back," she said, with the ghost of another smile. "It was the only way by which I could keep it at all neat. I will be twenty-one the tenth of September. Now, if you will tell me what day and what month it is now, I will know how long a time I have been a prisoner here."

"Your birthday will occur the day after to-morrow," said Nick. "That was why I cried out when you told me on what day you were brought here. You have been a prisoner in this cavern more than two months."

"It seems like two years, sir. It has been horrible; but the fact that I was a prisoner and was kept in the dark a great deal of the time, and half starved all the time, was not the worst part of it."

"I can believe that," said Nick. "Who are these children?"

"I have no idea, save what they have told me; and their names constitute about all they could tell me. They are Giuseppe and Giulia—that is, Joe and Julia—Bufonti. I think, if you should question them, they could, perhaps, tell you more than they did me, because you would know better how to question them."

"And your own name, please?"

"The children called me Maria just now. They have an elder sister by that name, and it pleased them, when in the dark, to make believe that I was their sister. My name is Carlina di Giovanni; and it is true that one of my several given names is Maria. But," she added, with a smile, "do you care to go into the particulars about me just now? Would it not be better to attend to the children first? Poor little things; they have been very desolate, since they have been prisoners here. I think they would have died of fright, at first, if I had not been here to comfort them. For their sakes I am almost glad that I was here—now that the imprisonment is at an end. And will you tell me, sir, who you are, and how it happens that you speak Italian so perfectly?"

"My name is Nicholas Carter. I am a detective," said Nick; and she uttered a little cry of surprise, and cried out:

"How very strange. You are the very man to whom I was directed when I sailed for New York from London."

CHAPTER III.

THE GIRL OF THE CAVERN.

Carlina was seated upon a camp stool that the detective had brought back with him from another part of the cavern when he brought the food to her, and now the two children had cuddled down beside her, and after their gorging with the food were drowsy; so that even while she was speaking their heavy lids drooped and they both fell into sleep.

Nick, looking down upon them, smiled.

"I think the children are very well as they are for the present," he said. "But that last remark of yours, Miss Di Giovanni, seems to require something of an explanation. You say that you were directed to me before you sailed from London?" he asked.

"Yes. I had a letter to you; a letter of introduction, and of recommendation also. But I haven't it now. It was taken from me with my baggage, I suppose. At least, I have seen nothing of my effects since I landed in New York."

"We will get to that presently. In the meantime, who was the letter from? Who wrote it?"

"Inspector Pettus, of Scotland Yard."

"Ah, yes. I know the inspector very well indeed."

"He said that you were old friends."

"How does it happen that you did not get to me with the letter, or did not communicate with me in any way, after you arrived here?" he asked.

"I was not permitted to do anything at all, Mr. Carter. I fell at once into the hands of my enemies. I was taken in a closed conveyance. I was rendered unconscious by a drug, I suppose, that must have been mixed with a glass of red wine that I drank. When I recovered from the effects of it I was—down there;" and she pointed toward the hole in the floor of the cavern from which he had rescued her.

"You arrived, then, on the fourth of July."

"Yes; and I must have been brought here that same day, or that evening."

"And since that time——"

"I have been a prisoner in that place."

"Impossible," he exclaimed, turning again toward the hole in the floor.

"Believe me," she said, trying to smile, "it is quite a spacious place down there, although there seems to be no outlet from it, through which even one of those children could pass, save this one before us. But it is a large place, of many rooms as large as this one, and with galleries leading between them; and there is more of a stream of water down there than here; and in one of the rooms, so called, there is quite a pool, in which I was enabled to bathe. The water was very cold, however," she added, with a reminiscent shudder.

"Were you ill-treated in any other manner than being held a prisoner?" he asked.

"No," she replied, after a short pause; "not in the manner your words suggest. I had a means of protecting myself, you see;" and she thrust one hand into the bosom of her waist and drew forth a very efficient-looking weapon of thirty-eight caliber; and she added, with another of her rare smiles: "I have to thank Inspector Pettus for providing me with that. If I had not had it I should have been—dead, perhaps, by now."

"Pettus gave it to you?" asked Nick.

"Yes; the very last moment before I parted with him. He asked me if I was armed, and I told him no. Then he gave me the revolver, and he said:

"'Take this, and dispose of it somewhere about your person so that you can get it very quickly, if you should want it. You will not need it on shipboard, but after you arrive in New York you may require it. It

is the sort of thing,' he added, 'which, if wanted, is needed very badly indeed.'

"He advised me, before I landed in New York, to conceal it about my person, and to tell you at once, when I found you, about it. After that I was to take your advice in everything."

Nick was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"It is not fair to keep you here discussing such things, Miss Di Giovanni, when I know that your strongest wish is to be taken away from here, and taken where you can make yourself comfortable."

She smiled wanly.

"I confess that I should like above all things an opportunity to bathe, and to change my clothing throughout. My captors have given me no other clothing since I have been here, and the almost ice-cold water of the subterranean brook was all that I had to wash them in. But, you see, I have no money—no means whatever to——"

"I don't think you need let that worry you," Nick interrupted her. "Come; we will go at once. I will take you to my own home for the present—if you are willing to go there."

"Indeed I am glad to go, Mr. Carter; but——"

"Well?"

"I have nothing; no wrap; not a thing."

"It will not matter," he laughed. "The day is warm. My car is waiting for me in the woods over our heads. Evening will have fallen by the time we are on our way, and we will not be long in getting to my home. Come. I will carry the children; you shall follow along behind. There is nothing that you are leaving that you would like to take with you, is there?"

"Just some papers and some drawings that I have made; and some notes that I have kept from time to time. They are—down there."

"I will get them, if you will tell me how to find them," he told her.

"I am afraid that you could not find them," she said. "I have hidden them so that they could not be found. Wait here, please."

She started toward the ladder, but he interrupted her.

"Here, take this," he said, handing her his electric flashlight.

He assisted her upon the ladder and waited there until she returned to him, after an absence of five minutes.

"Please take these," she said, handing him a package that was tied with a strip of cloth evidently torn from one of her garments. "We will go over them later, and, perhaps, they will be of assistance—to me, at least. Now, sir, I am ready."

He looked at her with undisguised admiration in his eyes, as he took the package.

"You are wonderfully self-reliant and cool," he told her; and she smiled back at him as she replied:

"I learned that quality very long ago, Mr. Carter; and I have had two months here to prepare myself for any emergency that might arise. I think this was about the only one that I did not foresee, or expect—rescue. I had given up all hope of that since so long a time has passed without a sound or a sight of my captors."

"We will not discuss it further now," he replied; and he lifted the children in his arms and started away toward that entrance to the cavern that was through the old hollow tree in the woods.

Danny was waiting with the car at the same place where twice before he had awaited the detective while he was in or near the cavern, and he was much too well trained, as the chauffeur-assistant of the detective, to ask questions.

The children were delighted with the prospect of a ride in an automobile, and forgot their troubles for the time being. It was dark by the time they reached the ferry to One Hundred and Thirtieth Street—and Danny was not long in taking the car down Broadway, and to Nick Carter's home in Madison Avenue.

Nick called Patsy from the house to take the children in the car to police headquarters, where a record of their disappearance would doubtless be found, although Nick had personally heard nothing about it; and we might as well say here and now that two hours later he received a telephone call from headquarters to the effect that both of the little ones were safely at home; and as their presence in the cavern was only an incident connected with this story, we will leave them there.

Carlina di Giovanni was given at once into the hands and care of Adelina, Patsy's wife, and they went together to Adelina's rooms, where Carlina was provided with all that was needed to make her comfortable and presentable—while Nick waited in his study for her to relate to him the rest of her strange story.

"You may remain," he told Adelina, when the girls appeared. "Now, Miss Di Giovanni, let us get at the meat of your story first. Why did Inspector Pettus send you to me?"

"Because I had asked him to direct me to some person in New York City—or anywhere in this country—who could help me."

"Who could help you—to what, please?"

"To find my brother who has disappeared, for one thing. To save my fortune, which others are striving to take away from me, for another," was the direct answer.

"Will you explain to me just how those conditions happened to exist?" the detective asked.

"Yes. I can do that in a very few words, I think. You will wish to ask me about it, after I have done so, and perhaps that will be the better way."

"I think so. But give me the important points first."

"I am an Italian, as, of course, you know already. I was born in that part of London which is called Saint John's Wood. You already know my age."

"Yes."

"My father was a banker and a speculator. He had won a fortune in his business ventures; he had, in fact, inherited somewhat of a fortune from his father, who was also a banker in London, though in a smaller way than my father."

"Your mother was an Italian also?"

"Yes. My mother came from Salerno, in Italy, but my father took her at once to England, as soon as they were married. My brother and I were born there. My brother, who has disappeared—who, I fear, has been assassinated—was two years older than I. My father was assassinated just a month before my brother came of age."

"What was your father's full name? It may be necessary that I should know it."

"He was Dominico di Giovanni; my brother's name is Salvatore."

"Thank you."

"I was finishing at a convent near Paris at the time of my father's death. I forgot to tell you that my mother has been dead several years. It is the only good thing connected with this sad experience that I have passed through, that she was spared all knowledge of it."

The detective inclined his head sympathetically.

"My father was shot down and instantly killed while he was ascending the doorsteps of his own home; my brother, who was beside him at the time, was also wounded by another bullet; but not seriously. A message was sent to me at once, but it was either intercepted or delayed purposely, so that I did not receive it till more than a week after it had been sent. When I did get it I hastened to London—to find when I arrived there that my father had been buried before I got there, that my brother had mysteriously disappeared, and that the bulk of my father's fortune had disappeared at the same time. I was left practically without resources—as compared to what I had been accustomed to."

"But your father was a banker, you say. His business must have been so arranged that it could go on without him," said the detective.

"Listen, Mr. Carter."

"Well?"

"Two weeks before my father was killed he came to see me at the convent near Paris. He took me to ride with him, and we drove together, in an automobile, nearly all that day, for it was soon after nine o'clock in the morning when we started, and it was after seven in the evening when he returned me to the sisters. We stopped, of course, several times for food and refreshments. It was while on that ride that he told me of the things which were destined, later, to bring me here and place me face to face with present conditions."

CHAPTER IV.

THE HIDDEN FORTUNE.

"That was why he came to see me at the convent," she added, after a pause.

"Yes," replied the detective; "and I suppose that what he told you that day really accounts for all the mystery in which you are involved just now."

"That is correct."

"Is it your purpose to tell me all about what was said to you that day?"

"Indeed it is. That is precisely why I came to America, Mr. Carter."

"Have you already told Pettus about it?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Almost at once—after the assassination of my father and the disappearance of my dear brother."

"But that was nearly two years ago."

"That is true. In the meantime, Inspector Pettus has been working on the case—at my urgent request, very quietly, although, of course, the assassination of my father created a great stir at the time; the assassins were discovered and paid——"

"Were discovered?" said Nick, in surprise.

"Yes; and paid the penalty for their crime. English justice works more quickly than yours does over here, so Inspector Pettus told me."

"And he is right about it, too. There are too many

delays here; too many loopholes for appeals; too many stays, as they are called, in the law. But, go on."

"The murderers of my father—two in number—were found. Both were executed for the crime."

"But your brother was shot at the same time and slightly wounded. Within a few days after that he disappeared. Those murderers should have been made to tell all that they knew about the last circumstance—and there is no doubt that they could have told all about it. It would seem that the same plot which resulted in the death of your father and the wounding of your brother was responsible for Salvatore's disappearance, so soon after it."

"I quite agreed with you. So did Inspector Pettus. Now, I do not know whether we can assume it or not."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The answer to your question is involved in the story that my father told to me that day of the ride around Paris and it's environments."

"I see. Well?"

"Certain it is that the men who shot my father and brother would not, if they could, tell one word about the crime, or about what led up to it; and they denied all knowledge of the reasons for my brother's disappearance. In short, they would not tell anything at all. The evidence against them for the double shooting was conclusive and they were convicted. But they could not be induced to betray their associates in the crime, nor would they confess what their motive was in committing the act."

"I understand. They were bound to their associates by some oath which they would not break, even in the face of death."

"Exactly that, Mr. Carter."

"Now, if you please, get to the story told to you by your father. That seems to be the test of the entire affair."

"My father had not notified me of his intention to visit me that day, as had been his custom every time he came there to see me. Instead, he appeared without any warning whatever. It is perhaps necessary that you should know something about the apparent mystery of that visit itself."

"I desire to know all about everything that concerns this matter, if I am to take charge of it," was the reply.

"I was in attendance at one of my classes when the mother superior of the convent sent for me. I went to her room, and found my father waiting there. I did not know him when I entered the room, because he was in disguise, but the moment he spoke I knew him."

"Of course."

"He wore a white wig and a flowing beard of white, and looked the part of a patriarch. He told me, laughingly, that there were reasons why he did not wish others to know that he was in France at that time; that he had already explained all that was necessary to the mother superior, and that I was to get my things and go with him for the day.

"The car that waited for us was a closed one; nevertheless, as soon as we entered it my father half drew the curtains, so that he could not be seen very plainly as we drove along.

"I was greatly mystified, of course, and for a time he did not relieve my anxiety; but then he began abruptly with the statement:

"'My daughter, my reason for appearing here in this manner to-day is the best one in the world. I am in momentary danger of assassination. It is to warn you of that, and to provide against some of the consequences of it, if it should happen, that I am here.'

"I need not tell you of my emotions. All you require, now, are the facts."

"Yes," said Nick.

"And I need not quote him. I will put into my own words the substance of what he told me. The telling of it, and the discussion between us, resulting from the tale, took all of that day, and might have continued on indefinitely."

"I want merely the bare facts. If I interrupt you with questions there will be a reason for doing so."

"I understand."

"Go on, then."

"The story was that my father, in his youth, had allied himself with a secret organization of his own countrymen."

"Wait. What was the name of that society?"

"He did not tell me that; he would not tell it to me. He said that he was sworn not to reveal any of the secrets of the society, and that it would be fatal to do so while, as things were then, he might find a way to escape. He added these words: 'So long as there is the slightest chance that I may escape the vengeance of the members of that society, I need not tell you more than is necessary at present. When I think there is no help for it I will tell you all.' I could not get him to say more on that point, Mr. Carter."

"Go on then."

"Our family is a noble one in Italy. My father was a descendant of a younger branch of it. But, being of noble blood, he had been induced, while a youth, to

join the society. I understood, from what he said to me that day, that it was against his will that he did so, but that there was no help for it; at least, he had thought so at the time he joined.

"He said that he had never been a willing or an active member of the brotherhood, as he called it; and in saying that, he added: 'But the time has now arrived when they demand my active participation in more ways than one. They have not only made demands upon me for a very large sum of money, but other demands as well, to which I cannot accede. For that they may decide to kill me, and, if they do so, the bolt will fall upon me without warning, and it will leave you fatherless—and penniless, too, unless I take this opportunity of providing against that contingency.'"

"Well?" asked the detective.

"He reached under the seat of the car and drew forth a leather bag. He opened it with a key, and showed me the contents without removing any of them from the bag. Then he closed it again, locked it, and gave me the key.

"The bag, he told me, contained Bank of England notes to the amount of fifty thousand pounds; also my mother's jewels, and other diamonds and jewels, worth about as much more; also many of his private papers which would explain to me nearly all that he failed to tell me that day about his personal affairs.

"'When we return to the convent,' he said, 'you will take this bag into the house with you, and you will dispose of it in your own room, where you can get possession of it at any moment. You will keep it securely locked, and hidden away somewhere in your room, and if anything should happen to me you are to use the money for your immediate needs.' Then he advised me about depositing it, in that case, with a certain banker in Paris.

"In case anything happened to him I was to take the papers and documents that I found in the bag to Inspector Pettus, in London; and he took from one of his pockets a sealed letter that was addressed to Inspector Pettus, which he gave to me and said that it was a letter of introduction to the inspector, and that it contained all the information that was necessary for the inspector, in addition to that contained in the other papers. I disposed of that letter about my person, and later I did give it to the inspector; but I have not reached that part of the story yet."

"Of course," said the detective, "I cannot understand just why your father took that method of providing for you against accident to himself; doubtless he had a reason?"

"His reason, as nearly as I could comprehend it, was secrecy. He gave me to understand that if he made such a provision for me, openly, his enemies would learn of it at once—that he could not keep it from them—and that the blow would fall upon him all the more quickly because he had done so. His whole aim, that day, seemed to be to avoid the chance that the blow would fall at all."

"Well?"

"He pushed the bag under the seat again, and then he told me this:

"'I have all my life, since I joined that fiendish society, anticipated this moment. I have known that some day the members would require of me more than I would be willing to perform, and that upon my refusal I would have to pay the penalty—unless I could persuade them to pass me by. I still have hopes that I may be able to persuade them, and that I may escape and be spared to you and Salvatore. But there is the possibility that I will not be able to persuade them—which means death to me; which also means danger to your brother; and so, having foreseen this moment, in a measure, I have prepared for it in every way that I could.

"'My daughter,' he said, 'it would not be possible for me to conceal anything in our home, or in my bank building, or with a London solicitor, or with a banker anywhere in the world, or with any person, anywhere in the world, that the secret of it would not be known at once to these men to whom I refer as my enemies, and yours.

"'Our home is not sacred from their system of spying upon my acts; I do not know whom among my employees at the bank I can trust, and whom I may not trust; I am literally enslaved in the meshes of their plots and espionage, and I cannot escape from them; and so I have found a safe place to hide what I wish to hide under their very noses—and there, when you have occasion to visit it, which God forbid that you should have, you will find a large fortune in Bank of England notes, in Bank of France credits, and in United States currency, safely deposited within the hiding place that I have selected. To that place I have taken, whenever I have visited it, large sums of the three characters of money that I have mentioned. To that place I have taken other and more valuable jewels than are here in the bag under the seat. And now, Carlina,' he added, 'at this moment when I am telling you about it, the sum I have concealed there, without counting the jewels, amounts to three hundred thou-

sand pounds in English money; and the jewels are worth another hundred thousand.'"

"Two million dollars, all told, in our money," said the detective. "And the hiding place for it all that, he said, was under their noses?"

"That," Carlina replied to him, "is what I do not know; is what I came to this country to find; is why I was taken to that cavern, and kept a prisoner there, because those men believe that I do know the secret of it, and took that means to force me to tell them."

CHAPTER V.

THE LEATHER BAG.

"This is indeed a strange story that you are telling me, Miss Di Giovanni," said the detective, and he did not intend to imply by that remark that he doubted it, or any part of it—merely that it was unprecedented; that it was remarkable that a man of the business acumen possessed by Dominico di Giovanni, the girl's father, should be compelled to resort to such methods in order to secure a competence for his children, when he should be taken away.

"Let us get through with what occurred during that day of the ride with your father," he added. "After that we will get down to the other things. What else did he tell you on that day?"

"He went over his whole life's history, and the history of his father, my grandfather, who died when I was six years old. In that connection he said this: 'I know now that my own father was also a member of that dreaded society; but I did not know it till a short time ago; and I never told him that I had joined it. For all I know your brother may have joined it, although he has denied any connection with such an organization when I have asked him. I would have denied it to my father!'"

"Go on, please."

"He instructed me what to do, in his business affairs, in case of his sudden death, and in case my brother, for any reason, could not act."

"He suspected, then, that your brother might not be able to act, did he?"

"So it would seem. He told me as much; and he said this: 'If Salvatore is already a member of this society, as I half suspect, he will become their easy victim—perhaps their willing one.'"

"What did he mean by that expression?" asked the detective quickly.

"I asked my father that question, and he replied:

"'Your brother has not been reared as I was. He is an Italian, but all his environment has been English. He has consorted very little with his own countrymen, save only as he has encountered them in business. But he is romantic and easily led, and he may be open to their blandishments, as I was—or he may be very much in their way, and be put out of it!'

"But that does not suggest how he might become a willing victim, or party, to their plots and schemes," said Nick.

"It is all that my father told me about that. I think he may have referred, possibly, to some of the methods of the society."

"How so?"

"There are women in its membership, as well as men. My father told me that. My brother was always impressionable, where women were concerned; he was always in love with a new face. My father may have meant that they would not hesitate to play upon that weakness of Salvatore's."

"I understand."

"That is the only way in which I can explain it."

"What instructions did he give to you, in relation to the business affairs?"

"He explained that he had become only the nominal head of his business; that his interest in it was very small, and that he had purposely rendered it so; that he had taken care to conceal the fact that he had turned a large part of his fortune into cash, and had hidden that money away as I have told you."

"Yes."

"That outside of his small holdings in the banking company, and aside from the cash that he had hidden away, his holdings were all in real estate—he had long ago become a British subject—where his enemies could not get hold of it; that he had made a will by which all that property was to be left equally to Salvatore and me, and in the event of the death, or the disappearance of either of us for two years, to the one remaining; and so forth. You do not care about the provisions of the will?"

"No; not particularly. Not now, at least. Well?"

"In the event of necessity I was to go before the directors of his bank, placing all my interest in the concern, unreservedly in their hands, as if I had perfect confidence in them, and let it rest in that way, and that is what I have done."

"But, even now, you are a rich woman, Miss Di Giovanni. There is the real estate, and——"

"That, of course, has been tied up, since the disappearance of my brother. The two years have nearly expired, when it would all fall to me; but not quite."

"There was the cash, and the jewels that your father brought to you, in the leather bag, and which you were to conceal in your room and use in case of accident to him."

"That," she replied simply, "disappeared also."

"What? You lost that fifty thousand pounds—two hundred thousand dollars—and the jewels that were your mother's?" exclaimed the detective.

"Yes. I lost it."

"But how?"

"Through carelessness you will say, although I do not see how I could have done differently."

"Tell me how it happened."

"I have already told you that the message concerning my father's death was delayed, or was held back, so that it was more than a week afterward before I received it."

"Yes."

"Then a man came to the convent after me in great haste. He arrived within an hour after the delivery of the message. I was even then awaiting the conveyance that was to take me to the station for the train to Calais. I should say, right here, that the man was from my father's bank, that I knew him by sight, and had spoken with him before, and that I had then, and have now, no reason to suspect him of complicity in anything that happened before or that happened after his arrival at the convent."

"Save in a general way, you mean?" suggested Nick.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"That your father told you that in his home and in the bank, also, he was surrounded by spies. It has occurred to you that that man might have been one of them."

"Yes."

"Well, go on about the leather satchel."

"I was packing when the man arrived. He professed to know nothing of the message I had just received, but said that he had been sent because nothing had been heard from me. I believed him. I let it go at that. My anguish about the death of my dear father was too keen just then to give thought to the little things of life."

"I can well understand that."

"In my packing, the leather satchel, securely hidden away, had been forgotten. The arrival of the messenger somehow brought it to mind. I brought it forth from its hiding place and opened it. It was intact at the time, just as I had hidden it away.

"For a moment I hesitated as to what to do with it. Then I decided. I opened it and took from it ten thousand pounds in Bank of England notes. I concealed the money about my person. Then I closed the bag again and locked it. I wrapped around it a lot of cord and tied the cord securely; then I sealed the knot with wax and placed the seal of this ring upon the wax;" and she extended one hand, showing the only ring she wore; a seal ring that had been given to her by her father when she went to the convent.

"And then what did you do with it?" asked the detective.

"I carried the bag to the mother superior in her private room, and I took there with me the last letter that I had received from my father. I gave the bag to the mother, and I told her that it contained some papers of value and asked her to keep it for me until I called for it, or sent for it. Then I showed her the letter I have mentioned, and in her presence I tore the first page of that letter in half, from the top to the bottom, and I gave her the first part of the half. I said:

"Mother, please do not deliver that bag into the possession of any person other than myself, unless that person should show you this other half of my father's letter, and you find that the two halves fit together perfectly. Just four weeks after that day, Mr. Carter, I went in person to get the bag. Inspector Pettus was with me. The bag was no longer in the possession of the mother superior. She said that a man had called for it, had shown her the other half of the letter, that she had fitted the two halves together, and that she had given him the bag."

"But—the other half of the letter——"

"The mother superior had them both. She had retained both of them as a receipt for the bag."

"But you had it about you; on your person; that other half of the letter," said Nick.

"I thought I had it, but when I searched for it there in the presence of the mother it was gone."

"When had you seen it last?"

"As a matter of fact I had not seen it since the day I bestowed it in the hiding place that I selected for it, at the time I tore the letter in half."

"Where did you hide it?"

"In a gold locket that I wore, attached to a neck chain that was around my throat."

"Who saw you put it there?"

"Nobody. I was alone in my room at the convent

when I did that; just before I left it to accompany the man who had gone there after me."

"Of course he knew nothing about the satchel, or of what disposition you had made of it?"

"Certainly not."

"Was any other person present when you gave the mother superior the instructions about it?"

"No; we were alone."

"When, after that, was the locket out of your possession?"

"Never at all."

"But you removed it from your neck at times, did you not?"

"No; never."

"How does it happen that you never opened the locket after you deposited the half of the letter inside of it?"

"There was no reason, only that I did not do so. I often thought of it, and of the letter as being there; but I did not open the locket. It required some skill to do so, as a matter of fact—and the point of a very fine needle as well."

"Did the mother superior describe the man who had called for the bag, and who gave her the remaining half of the letter?"

"Yes."

"Did that description accord with the man who went to the convent to take you away?"

"Not at all."

"What did Pettus think about it all?"

"He thought that the man you mention had found opportunity to steal the half of the letter from the locket while I was on my way home with him from the convent."

"And you——"

"I do not see how that could have been possible; and yet, I do not understand how it could have been possible to have taken it at any time, so far as that is concerned; and I cared, and care now, much less for the money that was in the bag than for the papers and my own mother's jewels that it contained."

"Did Pettus make any effort to find——"

"Inspector Pettus did everything that was possible in the matter, but not a trace of it could be found."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS HIDING PLACE.

"We will leave the direct subject of the bag for the present," said Nick.

"Not until I have told you this much, Mr. Carter, which Inspector Pettus directed me to tell you as soon as you were familiar with my story."

"Well?"

"He said: 'Tell Mr. Carter that I am still after the bag, or, rather, after the mystery of its disappearance, and that I shall not let up on it till I have found the man who got it, and those who sent him to get it.'"

"Very good. That is as it should be. Just now the important question seems to be this: What did your father tell you about the secret hiding place that he had selected for that fortune which amounts to two million dollars in our money?"

"I have already repeated to you practically everything that he told me about it, Mr. Carter."

"You have emphasized the word told in that statement."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because the bag that was stolen contained the key to that hiding place."

"The key?"

"By the word key I mean the directions how to find it."

"Oh, I understand."

"All that he said about the locality of the hiding place of the fortune was that it was 'under the noses' of the men whom he called his enemies, and that the bag contained, with the other articles inside of it, a letter addressed to me and written with the utmost care. That letter was the key to the hiding place of the fortune."

"And you permitted the bag to get away from you. It is too bad, but it cannot be helped now."

"No. It cannot be helped now."

"What about that letter? Could another person than you read it?"

"The letter? Yes. The key to the hiding place? I think not."

"Why do you think not, Miss Di Giovanni?"

"Because it was very cleverly concealed in the body of the letter."

"Let me understand; you did not read that letter?"

"No. I meant to, often; but I always, for one reason or another, postponed it until it was too late. If I had read it I would know now where to seek for the hiding place of the fortune."

"Could you have read it—the key, I mean—without difficulty?"

"Yes; and so could you—so could any person who understood the method by which the key was hidden in the body of the letter."

"Have you ever told anybody about that? Pettus, for instance?"

"No. Inspector Pettus told me to keep it to myself until the letter was found. He said that if I had read the letter at all it would be different, but because I had not, it was useless to betray the secret of it, until the letter was found again. But I would much rather tell you about it, if you will let me."

"I see no objection to that, Miss Di Giovanni."

"My father said to me these words, as nearly as I can remember them; at all events it is sufficient for our purposes: 'Remember, Carlina, the letter means nothing of itself. It was written merely to conceal the key to the place where I have hidden the money and the jewels. It is a long letter of advice to you through life, and is such that any father might write to his daughter. But you will find the key to the hiding place of the money in this way. As you read the letter write down upon a separate sheet of paper, the second word of the second line, the third word of the third line, the fourth word of the fourth line, the fifth word of the fifth line, and so on till you get to the tenth word of the tenth line; then begin at the first word of the eleventh line, the second word of the twelfth line, the third word of the thirteenth line, and so on to the tenth word of the twentieth line; then again at the first word of the twenty-first line, and follow out the same rule; also the first word of the thirty-first line, and so on, as I have told you, to the end of the letter."

"Very clever," said Nick, nodding his head.

"Yes," she replied; "and, although they succeeded in stealing the satchel, and in possessing themselves of the contents of it, including the letter, I do not think that they have been able to read the key to the hiding place of the fortune."

"Perhaps not; but why?"

"Because of the fact of my imprisonment in the cavern. Because those men thought it necessary to capture me and imprison me, and to try to force the secret of the hiding place from me."

"You have not told me yet why you came to this country at all, nor why Pettus sent you to me," said Nick. "I assume that it was not with the intention of asking me to return with you, and to join in the search on the other side."

"No; it was because Inspector Pettus decided that he had exhausted all his resources over there, and that the hiding place might be here in this country."

"Here? Why did Pettus think that?"

"Only on general principles."

"But over here, in any place, would not be under the noses of those men of that secret society," said the detective.

"Why not? Inspector Pettus says that in all probability they have headquarters in almost every country in the world. As well here as there, he said. And there was another reason, too, for his having that opinion."

"What was it?"

"My father was in the habit of coming here every year. Sometimes he came twice in a year."

"Here to New York?"

"Yes."

"What brought him here? Do you know that?"

"Only what I have heard him say about it; business."

"Did he have a branch of his bank in this country?"

"No; I think not. He had what he called a correspondent, or a corresponding bank, here in this city, though; one with which his bank did business almost exclusively."

"I understand that. Do you know what bank it is, in this city?"

"Yes; it is called Otono Sabino and Company."

"Otono Sabino?" said the detetcive. "I know him. It is rather strange, too, the way it has come about. That cavern where I found you was revealed to me through a case that I had for him. His two children were abducted, and I traced them to that cavern."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Then it cannot be that Mr. Sabino is connected with that terrible society that my dear father had such good reason to dread, can it? They would not abduct—but what am I talking about? There is probably no connection between that society and—— Oh, dear, I am getting all at sea."

The detective smiled indulgently.

"No one could blame you for that, Miss Di Giovanni," he said. "No, I do not think it at all likely that Mr. Sabino could be associated with the society so dreaded by your father—and yet, it is within the range of possibilities. But they would hardly abduct the little children of their own members. They must have other means than that for extorting money from them. Take your father's case, for instance; he told you that he had been called upon for a sum larger than he was willing to give."

"Yes."

"Still, it is evident that the existence of the cavern

where I found you is known to the members of that society in this country. Your presence there is sufficient proof of that."

"Yes; I had that on my mind when I became so confused a moment ago."

"We can look back upon the circumstance of your being there somewhat in this way," said Nick.

"Yes?" she asked inquiringly.

"First, the visit your father made to you at the convent at the time he left the bag with you was known to his enemies, although he went there in disguise and tried to keep the fact of the visit a secret."

"Yes; I think so."

"Second, he was probably followed closely when he went there to see you; your ear was probably under espionage all that day, even though none of the conversation between you and your father may have been overheard."

"That may be true, too, and doubtless is so," she assented.

"Third, it was therefore known that he took a leather bag with him that day, which he did not bring away with him, and, therefore, that he left it with you."

"Very likely."

"Fourth, they could assume, from the fact of his visit to you in disguise, what his errand concerned—or, at least, the substance of it; therefore, it would be assumed that the bag he left with you on that occasion contained not only valuables of much worth, but, perhaps, the very information that he put into it, to be used by you, in case of his death."

"Ah, yes; that is quite true."

"Fifth, the message to you, about the death of your father, was delayed purposely so that one of their trusted representatives might go after you and be with you when you came away from the convent, in order to relieve you of the bag if you should bring it with you—and I very much doubt, just now, if you would ever have reached London at that time if you had taken the bag with you."

"I see it; I see it plainly," she exclaimed.

"Sixth, you fooled them and delayed them in their plans by not taking the bag with you; and you made no mention of it. You had other baggage with you, which was propably searched en route without your knowledge. What they sought they did not find; hence the inevitable conclusion that you left the bag at the convent."

"I see it very plainly," she repeated.

"Seventh, the man who went there after you knew that you consulted with the mother superior before you came away with him; he may even have managed to secrete himself where he could overhear what was said in that conversation you had with her about the letter."

"I doubt the possibility of that. Still——"

"Still, it may have happened. They must have known something about the torn letter and the two parts of it so made, or else they would not have searched for it—and found your half; or——"

"Yes?" she asked eagerly, bending toward him when he hesitated.

"Girls are likely to hide things of that sort in lockets that are fastened to chains, hung around their necks. It is the likeliest place in the world—the very first place in which I would search for a treasured object not too bulky to be so accommodated. The locket was probably taken from you while you were on the way to London; a clever man could do it readily enough without your knowledge. If so, the half of the letter was found, it was recalled that you had consulted with the mother superior before leaving, and by putting two and two together, it was obvious what had become of the satchel, and in whose charge it had been consigned by you," said Nick.

CHAPTER VII.

WORKING OUT THE PLOT.

"Now," said the detective, "we will come down to the present predicament, and to the very pertinent question as to how it came about."

"Yes," she said. "I thought it best to leave that part of it to the last."

"Decidedly; and I wish to approach it exactly as it all happened; therefore, we will begin with whatever circumstance it was that decided you to come here at all. What was it? and when was it first suggested?"

"First, you must remember that it is now very nearly two years since the death of my father and the disappearance of my brother."

"Yes."

"In the beginning—I was barely nineteen years old then——"

"I know."

"You must understand that I was terribly upset by the two calamities."

"Certainly."

"It all came upon me with such stunning force, and

I was so totally unprepared, and I was so unaccustomed to thinking for myself, that I did not know what to do, or which way to turn. I was all at sea."

"I appreciate all that, my dear young lady, perfectly well."

"I think I forgot all about the satchel, all about my father's fortune, all about the things he had told me, until Inspector Pettus came to me to interview me in the course of his search for the murderers."

"And then——"

"Then, while he questioned me, I told him all about it; much as I have told you about it. He inspired me with confidence, and I told him all."

"There could not have been a better man to receive it."

"It was he who advised me to go after the satchel at once, and he went with me, as I have said."

"He believed that the satchel would contain information that would aid him in the hunt for the murderers."

"Yes; he said as much."

"I believe it, too; but the satchel was not found."

"No. That was four weeks after the death of my father. Then came the weary weeks while detectives under Inspector Pettus were seeking the assassins. Much of the time I was barely conscious of what I said and did."

"It was a trying time for you, I know."

"I had to go over that conversation I had with my father in the automobile, time and time again, with the inspector."

"I know. He thought each time that you would recall something that you had forgotten to tell him before. His first duty was to get the murderers. Well?"

"During that time the directors of the bank sent for me, and then only I remembered that my father had expected that I would go to them. Well, I went to them at their request, as it happened. I signed some papers—he had told me to do everything they wished me to do, and not to let it appear that I mistrusted them at all. I did as he directed."

"That was right."

"Then the murderers were traced and caught. I do not know how it was done. Then came the trial at which the king's counselor insisted that I should be present. It was all very harrowing, and I broke down utterly under the strain."

"And no wonder."

"I was ill after that—very ill indeed. It was almost a year before I was myself again—that is, before I came to, so to speak, and found myself."

"I understand."

"Then, bit by bit, it all came back to me; the things that my father had said to me that day of the ride. I remembered his eagerness about the hidden fortune. I recalled how he had toiled to save it and to hide it away for me, in case this very thing that happened should come to him. I remembered that it was my duty to seek for that hidden fortune."

"You were right about that."

"So I wrote a letter to Inspector Pettus and asked him if he would be good enough to call upon me when he was not otherwise engaged; and he came."

"Yes? Well?"

"He told me that he had been expecting to hear from me, and knew that I would send for him as soon as I felt able to do so; but, also, that he had not been idle in my affairs. He had been trying to trace the bag that was stolen, all the time."

"I see. That was like Pettus."

"He had had the man shadowed who went to the convent after me; he had been seeking my brother all the time, of course; in fact, my affairs had been receiving the same attention from him as if I had been active in the matter myself; but—nothing had come of it."

"Nothing?"

"Not a thing. To use his own expression, he said he was up a blind alley."

"Well?"

"We went over the case again in every detail. I told him again all about that secret visit to me by my father, the last time I had ever seen him. I went over the conversation of that day in detail with him. Nothing came of it at all. We were both up a blind alley."

"And then——"

"Then he began to question me about the details of my father's life, as far as I knew about them; and then it was that I mentioned the fact that my father had been in the habit of visiting this country, at least once every year; that he had always told me, laughingly, that he was going on business, but that others had received the impression that he took the trip as a vacation. The inspector questioned me very closely about that."

"And, I suppose, from what you told him about it, concluded that the fortune your father had hidden away for you might be concealed over here?"

"Yes, Mr. Carter; only, like you, he balked at that expression, 'under their very noses.'"

"Yet he sent you here, and to me, to search for the hidden fortune?"

"His idea about it was the same that you have expressed; that the society of which my father was a member has many ramifications, and that it also has headquarters everywhere. If that is true, 'under their noses' might mean that it is concealed near them here."

"Possibly, for example," said the detective, smiling, "in that very cavern where I found you?"

"Of course Inspector Pettus knew nothing about that cavern."

"No. Yet, the fact that you were a prisoner there suggests that it is one of the society's meeting places; or a headquarters, at least. Still, I hardly think that, at present. We will give more attention to that idea later on. The point is, that Pettus thought it was worth while to make a search over here."

"Yes; because he had exhausted every resource that he had there. He said that he would continue the search, of course, but that it was a good idea for me to come here, to engage your interests in the matter, and to——"

"I understand. The only thing that is strange about it is that Pettus has not communicated with me himself, now that two months have passed since you came here, and during that time he has not heard from you."

"It is strange—unless; unless letters have been sent to him to make him think that I am all right over here."

"By Jove!" said the detective, with renewed interest. "I had not thought of that. It is more than likely true, too; and such letters, if they have been sent to him, should afford a clew of some sort. I will cable to Pettus in the morning. Now, please tell me about your arrival here, and the manner in which you fell into the hands of the Philistines, so to speak."

"Yes," she said.

"You are very tired, I know, and we will close our consultation with that."

"Thank you. I am worn. The ship that brought me here docked before noon on the fourth of July. We were——"

"Wait. Did you travel alone?"

"No. I had a maid with me; a middle-aged woman who also acted partly in the capacity of companion, and, therefore, of chaperon."

"Yes. And you likewise made acquaintances, while on the voyage over here?"

"Two only that I could call acquaintances."

"Have you any idea what became of the maid?"

"None at all. I have not seen her since we left the steamer. We——"

"Wait again. Was she—is she an Italian?"

"Yes."

"And had served you how long?"

"She had served me, personally, since my return from the convent; but she has been a member of the household almost since I can remember; since I was a young girl. I think she was about the only one of our servants that my father thoroughly trusted."

"Who were the two acquaintances that you made on the steamer?"

"A gentleman and his wife; Monsieur and Madame Malet."

"Therefore French?"

"Yes; although they looked Italian. They were very pleasant and gracious to me, all the way over, particularly so when I was ill on board the ship."

"Now about your arrival here, and your disappearance, after you arrived here, if you will tell me?"

"Inspector Pettus had directed me to go at once to the Hotel Mammoth, and from there to send a letter to you. I found that Monsieur Malet and his wife were going to the same hotel, and that they had been there before. When the ship arrived at the pier Monsieur Malet came hurrying to me while my baggage was undergoing examination, and said that their own car had been sent to the pier to meet them and invited me to accompany them to the hotel in it."

"So they were the people who led you into the trap? I see."

"Mr. Carter, I have often thought that since I have been imprisoned in that cavern, and yet they were so kind, all the way over, and so considerate——"

"But tell me about your ride in the car with them."

"It was very strange, that ride. I had never been in New York before. It was all quite new to me. We chatted together——"

"Wait again. Was the maid in the car with you?"

"No. I had sent her to the hotel in a hired taxicab. With all our hand baggage the car would have been quite crowded with Sarah Norville in it. She is very large."

"I see. Well?"

"We had been riding perhaps thirty minutes—rather less than that, I think—and were passing through Fifth Avenue, so Monsieur Malet told me, when he called to the chauffeur and directed him to stop for a moment at a hotel we were passing. While the car drew up at a side entrance to the hotel he got out and went inside the building, begging us to excuse him, and saying that he would be absent only a few moments. In two or three minutes he was back again, telling madame that he had unexpectedly encountered some of their friends

in the corridor of the hotel, and asking her to go inside for a moment to see them. She went with them, and after a few minutes more a man, who was one of the hotel servants, came out and said that he had been directed by Monsieur Malet to go with me to the Hotel Mammoth, as monsieur and his wife would be detained. Then he got upon the front seat beside the chauffeur, and we drove on again."

CHAPTER VIII.

TRACED ACROSS THE OCEAN.

"I can see it all now," said the detective.

"Ah, yes; but I suspected nothing at the time. I had no reason to do so."

"No reasons save those of your father's death, your brother's disappearance, and the general warning that your father had given you," said Nick. "Well, what happened then?"

"We drove steadily forward, so long a time that I began to get nervous. But I had no reason to suppose it was not all right. I had never been in the city before, and I had no idea where the hotel was located, only in a general way."

"Exactly."

"But, at last, I called to the chauffeur by ringing the electric bell—the car was what is called a limousine. It stopped when I rang, and the man who had come out of the hotel got down and came to the door, but when he opened it to speak to me he stepped inside and closed the door after him. I was so amazed that I did not speak at first, and, before I had a chance to do so, he seized me and pressed a towel over my face that he had kept concealed in one of his hands. I remember that I struggled, but that is all I do remember. When consciousness returned I was—where you found me."

The detective nodded his head several times.

"Go on," he said. "Who was there with you?"

"Two women whom I had never seen before; also two men whom I had never seen before, either. They were standing around me, down in that hole where you rescued me. They had evidently had some difficulty in restoring me to consciousness and were frightened; but as soon as I opened my eyes they left me. I was very ill then."

"From the effects of the chloroform they had given you," said Nick.

"Undoubtedly. Fortunately, in their excitement, they had forgotten to search me, and I still had the revolver that Inspector Pettus gave to me; and I think it was fortunate that I did have it."

"Why?"

"Because there is no knowing to what torture I might have been subjected if it had not been in my possession. Sometimes they starved me for days at a time to make me give it up to them, but I would not do so; and I would not permit one of them, not even one of the women, to come down the ladder to me, where I was."

"You were a brave girl," said the detective, with admiration.

"I don't know whether it was bravery or terror that made me do as I did," she replied. "I know that I threatened to shoot the first one, man or woman, who descended that ladder, and that I would have carried out the threat."

"They knew that you meant it, too."

"Yes, indeed."

"And they resorted to all sorts of expedients, to compel you to give up the pistol?"

"Yes. They refused me a change of clothing, and I had to do my washing in the little brook of ice-cold water that trickled through the cavern. You see there is a bar on the under side of the trapdoor of rock, with which I could fasten it, so that they could not raise it from above. Sometimes, when I had sufficient food, I would not let them open the trapdoor for days at a time."

"And then?"

"Sometimes, also, when I did open it, there was nobody there; but I did not dare to venture into the cavern above me, fearing that they were lying in wait for me to overpower me."

"And they starved you?"

"For days at a time, frequently. Then, when the children were brought there and put into the lower cavern with me it was better. They were obliged to supply the little ones with food, you know."

"I suppose so. Now, what was said about the hidden fortune?"

"Oh, that was always the topic of conversation on their parts, whenever the trapdoor was raised."

"Tell me about what was their line of questioning."

"They said that they knew that my father had hidden away a fortune, somewhere, and that I knew the hiding place of it; that I would be set at liberty the moment I told them the secret; that if I did not reveal it I would never escape from the cavern alive; that they would starve me to death—oh, and it was all about the same. Once they starved me for three whole days, and then dangled food before my eyes, offering it to me if

I would give them the revolver. But I would not. And then the time came when they disappeared altogether, and I believed that I had been left there to starve indeed, and with the little children."

"But even then you did not venture into the upper part of the cavern?"

"No. I feared that it was another plot to induce me to go out; that they would seize me if I did so."

"You had no idea that those men and women had been captured, and had been taken away? That rescue had been close at hand, if you had only been aware of it?" Nick asked.

"None at all, Mr. Carter."

"Did you not see, at one time and another, four men there, besides the two women?" Nick asked her.

"More than that; I saw, at different times, as many as eight different men; but only the same two women; and sometimes the women were not there, or, at least, I did not see them, when the men would raise the trapdoor."

"Four of those men, and the two women, are in prison now, Miss Di Giovanni," said the detective; "but I doubt very much if they can be made to talk. I captured them at the time the Sabino children were rescued. Did you know that they were there?"

"I knew that there were other children there, but I did not see them. I only heard them at times; two or three times only."

"There is no doubt in your mind now, is there, that the man and woman who were so very friendly to you on the steamer were confederates of your captors?"

"There is none now; there was very little before."

"In your talks with your captors, was the leather bag that was stolen from the convent, ever mentioned?"

"No; only in a general way."

"What do you mean by a general way?"

"That the bag was not mentioned; but they spoke of information they had about me, and in regard to the secret which they supposed I knew in reference to the hiding place of the money and jewels, which convinced me that they knew about the bag and its contents."

"Was your brother ever mentioned?"

"Only by me."

"In what way?"

"I asked them, over and over again, what they had done with my brother."

"And the reply?"

"Was that they knew nothing about him, but that he was probably dead, and that I would go the same way that he had gone, unless I decided to tell them the secret."

"Of course you could never hear them talking together, among themselves?"

"No; when the trapdoor was down not a sound could be heard from above by me. It was as silent as the grave down there."

"I think it is a remarkable thing that you have come out of it all as well as you have done," said the detective.

"Yes. So do I. But I had resigned myself to anything that might happen, and I had resolved that I would die rather than let one of them approach me."

"You did well in that," said Nick. "There is no knowing what they might have done, if once they had succeeded in getting their hands upon you."

"I know; and I knew. I think that something of the spirit of my father descended upon me during that trying time."

"You are a brave young woman; and now, Adelina must take you away and put you to bed."

"Thank you."

"To-morrow I will cable to Pettus. The real trail of all this begins over on the other side. He should have found it there."

"I think, Mr. Carter, that he had done all that a man can do," she told him.

"I know that, and there is no better man than Inspector Pettus. Your brother, if he is alive, and we could find him, would be a valuable asset in this search."

"Oh, Mr. Carter, never mind the money at all, if only you can find out what became of Salvatore. If he is alive——"

"Miss Di Giovanni, I do not think there is any hope of that. What you have told me convinces me that your father trusted you, rather than your brother, and that the members of the society that wanted your father's money were aware of that fact. I think that they put him out of the way, as they did your father, believing that you, alone in the world, would prove to be an easy mark in their hands. You and Pettus made just one serious mistake in the matter of your coming here."

"What was that?"

"You, or he, should have written to me and notified me of your coming; and he should have cabled to me, in any case, when you started. However, that cannot be remedied now."

"No."

"The case," said Nick reminiscently, "is a peculiar

one, as it stands. The men who are known to have been associated with the affair, from the start, are all accounted for. The assassins of your father—and probably your brother—have been tried, convicted, and executed; the four men and the two women who were your direct jailers at the cavern, are under lock and key at this moment; and the very fact that since their capture, they have said not a word about you and the two children who were left in that place to starve, is sufficient proof that it is their intention to deny all knowledge of you, even when they know that you have been found and saved."

"Indeed it would appear so."

"And that decision by them is doubtless due to some oath or obligation that they are under to the society; and they will not break it."

"No; I doubt even if torture would induce them to do that," she replied.

"So, there remains now, at liberty, that we know about, only the man who went after you at the convent—and Pettus has probably had him shadowed every minute since he had the case; then there are the man and his wife who came over in the ship with you, and they have disappeared. True, we may be able to get trace of them, but they could deny all knowledge of the incident which resulted in your capture; then, there are the four extra men whom you saw at the cavern; but they are like myths, in the fact that you barely saw them, and probably would not be able to identify them if they were captured."

"I think I would be able to do so. I looked at them rather closely, determined to be able to remember them, if I ever saw them again," she said.

"It is a complicated case," said the detective, "with the ocean rolling between each end of it. But the amount of the fortune involved is worth an effort, my friend."

"Yes, I suppose so. But—I care more about the fate of my brother than I do about the money."

"Without doubt; well, we will try to discover the truth about both."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter."

The detective sent her away then with Adelina.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN FROM SCOTLAND YARD.

"Three hundred thousand pounds, in Bank of England notes, Bank of France notes, and money of the United States of America; one hundred thousand pounds in jewels. In your own money, Carter, a million and a half in cash, and half a million more in jewels; two million dollars all told. It is worth striving for."

"It certainly is, Pettus," replied the detective, smiling at his friend.

"She will be very liberal in the reward she will bestow if we are successful," the man from Scotland Yard continued.

"And she will keep her word as to that, Pettus; only, I suppose, unless you do recover the money and the jewels that her father hid away she will not have very much to pay you for the work you have already done."

"Look here, Carter," said Inspector Pettus, bending forward toward the detective in his eagerness, "what I have done has all been directly in the line of my duty, and I do not desire any reward beyond my pay."

"I know that, old chap; you are one man in ten thousand. The very fact that you are here now proves that. What are Miss Di Giovanni's present resources, if you know?"

"She had ten thousand pounds when she returned to London from the convent, and she has already spent nearly half of that; then, she must have had about a thousand pounds in her baggage that was stolen when those fiends took her to the cavern you have told me about."

"So, at the most, she has only about three or four thousand pounds—fifteen or twenty thousand dollars—left; eh?"

"About that, I should say."

"And where is that money now?"

"Would you believe it? She insisted that I should take charge of it for her. I have it with my solicitors, in London," was the answer.

"Well, she showed good sense in that, anyway; or, did you suggest it, Pettus?"

"No, indeed; I rather hesitated to accept the charge, when she wished me to take it."

The time of this conversation was a week to a day, after that one when the detective discovered the prisoners in the cavern.

He had cabled to Inspector Pettus the following morning, as he had announced that he would do, and in the course of the day received a reply to the effect that Pettus was leaving for New York by the first steamer; and he had arrived at noon that very day when the above scrap of their conversation was taking place.

Pettus had been in the detective's home less than an

hour, and the subject that had brought him there had only just been introduced.

And during that week that had passed, Nick Carter had not been idle. Don't let that be supposed for a moment.

The four men referred to as already in the tombs had been subjected to every known form of the much-talked-about "third degree," and the women also, and they had persistently disclaimed all knowledge even of the existence of Carlina di Giovanni, or of the two Bufonti children whom Nick had discovered in the cavern with her.

Nothing could induce them to talk, and they had been returned to their cells, leaving their interlocutors no wiser than before.

During that week Nick had spent three whole days in the cavern, searching it, and with no result.

He had left it each time no wiser than when he had entered it.

The cavern underneath the main one—that in which Carlina had so long been kept a prisoner—turned out to be literally a natural crypt of a place, with no outlet save that one through which Nick had rescued the young woman.

It was spacious, to be sure, composed of three enlarged sections which might be dignified by the name of rooms, with narrow passageways between them. And in one of these there existed a deep depression in which the water had collected, which formed the pool in which the prisoners had been able to bathe, and to wash their clothing.

There were crevices in the rocks through which the water, and therefore air, percolated; but not one of them was large enough to have permitted the passing of a house cat; there was no way in or out of the place, save by that trapdoor that has already been described.

Nick had argued to himself that there was very little chance that Dominico di Giovanni had hidden his money and jewels there, since it was extremely doubtful if he even so much as knew of the existence of the place.

"Pettus," he said presently, "you have been two years, practically, on this case."

"Yes, about that; that is, engaged upon the several ramifications of the case. I have had very little opportunity for a real search for the hidden fortune."

"I know; but you know a lot about the general case that the girl could not tell me."

"I'm not so sure about that. I know a lot about the conditions by which her father was surrounded before he was killed, if that is what you mean."

"Yes; that is precisely what I do mean."

"Well, Carter, I applied for the first vacation that I have taken in six years, to come over here and see you, and to consult with you about this affair. Now I am ready to devote the next two weeks to it entirely. Two weeks from to-morrow I must return on the *Mauretania*. I have already taken passage."

"All right. If we haven't accomplished something on this side by that time, I will go back with you," said Nick.

"By Jove, old man! I could almost wish that we might fail here, in that case."

"Who killed the girl's father, Pettus?"

"Two men who have both been hanged for it," was the laconic reply.

"Who was implicated with them?"

"The powers of darkness, I believe; at least, we were not able to trace out a single confederate. The crime was rather easily proven against them, but that was all."

"Those two men were Italians?"

"Yes."

"Long in London, or England?"

"No; recent arrivals there, at the time of the crime."

"From Italy, then?"

"No; from Argentina."

"You cabled Argentina?"

"Of course."

"And discovered—what?"

"Merely that they had criminal records there, and were bad characters. That they had arrived in Argentina one year before they sailed from Buenos Aires for London."

"But you traced them back to Italy, did you not?"

"Yes. Bad characters there, but had never been imprisoned, according to the records. We found no affiliations with any society, or group of men, worthy of investigation."

"A blind alley everywhere, eh?"

"Everywhere."

"Then there is nothing to be obtained from any knowledge that you have concerning them, is there?"

"Not a thing."

"What about the society that Di Giovanni told his daughter about on that visit he made to her at the convent?"

"I have not been able to get a single trace of it."

"Pretty well covered up, eh?"

"Thoroughly so—if it exists at all."

"Eh? Do you doubt its existence?"

"I have found myself doubting it at times—against my will."

"There can be no doubt that it exists, Pettus."

"I suppose not."

"Carlina says that her father told her that he was watched by spies in his own bank and in his own house, and——"

"I know that. I have had every man in the bank shadowed thoroughly; every one of them is under espionage now. I could put all that has been discovered inside a hollow pinhead."

"What about the man who went to the convent after the girl?"

"Outwardly he is a saint and has wings sprouting on his shoulders. I haven't the least doubt of his complicity in this entire affair, but—that is all. It is merely an opinion, entirely unsupported by anything that I have been able to discover about him."

"He must have been the one who stole the half of the torn letter from her locket," the detective said.

"Then he did it while she was wide awake, and seated beside him, on the boat in crossing the channel, or in the train between Paris and Calais, or between Dover and London. There wasn't any other opportunity. No, I don't think he had a chance to get it."

"When was it taken, then?"

"Probably after she reached her home in London."

"By that maid? Sarah Norville? The woman who came here with Carlina?"

"By her, or one of the other servants."

"You have kept watch of the servants over there?"

"Yes; and a thorough one. As before, nothing doing. I thought, when I got here, I'd have a try at that maid——"

"You did not know that she had disappeared?"

"No?"

"When the steamer arrived here and Carlina entered the automobile with the two acquaintances she had made aboard of it—I have my two assistants, and two Central Office men seeking them now—she put the maid into a taxi, and sent her to the hotel. The maid has not been seen since that moment. It is not known what became of her."

The inspector from Scotland Yard uttered a low whistle of surprise.

"Well?" he asked.

"That was more than two months ago, as you know."

"Yes."

"The cab cannot be traced. I only know that it was not a regular cab; or, if it was, that one of the regular chauffeur's was not in charge of it at the time. Otherwise, it could have been traced, even after so long a time."

The inspector whistled again.

"So," he said, "they provided even the cab, to take the maid away from the steamer, did they? That was foreseen, against Carlina's arrival here, also?"

"So it would appear."

"Does it suggest to you that the maid was innocent of complicity in the affair, after all, Carter?"

"No; on the contrary, it suggests to me that she was not; that she was the one who did the actual looting of the gold locket—and that one of two things has happened to her, since that day she arrived here."

"What two things?"

"Either she received her pay for what she had done and has returned to her old home in Italy—or, her dead body floated out to sea with the tide that same night."

"Humph; she might be sought in Italy."

"She is being sought there now, Pettus," was the quiet reply.

CHAPTER X.

THAT MAN, MALET.

"Pettus," said Nick, after a pause, "just what was it that convinced you of the wisdom of sending Carlina to New York to me?"

"I sent her here because I satisfied myself that her father did not conceal that fortune in London, or in England; because I was equally well satisfied that he did not hide it anywhere in France; because he was in the habit of coming here at least once a year, and oftener, twice each year; and because I had satisfied myself that that was what he made those periodical visits here to do."

"Why?"

"Well, I traced the banker backward to the time of his marriage. I think I know very nearly everything that he ever did that was important. I have even had expert accountants engaged in figuring up his business ventures."

"That wasn't a bad idea."

"I have had it figured out that he has collected, from time to time, during the last ten years, different large sums of money which aggregate rather more than he told his girl was hidden away for her use. There is no trace of the reinvestment anywhere, of those sums of money. That is point one."

"Yes."

"Point two is this: Each time that he closed out an investment, from which he acquired a particularly large sum—one of the sums that cannot be accounted for afterward—it happened always, only a short time prior to one of his trips to New York; and when he had occasion to come here twice a year, I find that one of those deals had been closed just before he sailed."

"Good again. Any more points?"

"Yes. I communicated with one of your treasury agents over there."

"Eh? What for?"

"Those fellows of yours, of the treasury department, keep pretty close tabs on diamonds and such things, that are purchased over there, and which may be brought to this country."

"Of course they do; that is their business."

"Well, I know one of your agents very well indeed. I interested him in what I was doing. Through him I have discovered that Dominico di Giovanni had paid duty to this government, during the last ten years, on five hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars' worth of diamonds and other jewels that he had brought here."

"Pettus, you're a corker."

"Thank you."

"That, with the other things I have told you, convinced me that the hidden fortune is here."

"I think that it is pretty good proof that it is here."

"I thought so. That is why I sent the girl here. Also, there was another reason."

"What was that?"

"It might not be called a good reason, for as it turned out, she was in just as great danger here as over there; but I wished her, if possible, to escape the fate that fell upon her brother Salvatore."

"What do you know about his fate?"

"Nothing."

"What was the method employed, in his disappearance? I do not know about that."

"You know that he was shot at the same time his father was murdered?"

"Yes."

"The wound that he received was very slight—through his right arm; the bone was not touched, but the wound was a painful one. He was taken to the hospital, to have it cared for, of course."

"Yes."

"He left there in a four-wheeler the next morning to return to his home. He never arrived. We found the four-wheeler and the driver. All that he could tell us was that his vehicle had been stopped by a jam in the street through which he was passing; that when the jam loosened up he drove on; when he arrived at the Di Giovanni home, and got down to open the door, there was no passenger inside; and that is positively all that he knows about it."

"It happened in the daytime, too?"

"Yes."

"You are pretty well posted on Italian societies, aren't you, Pettus?"

"As they exist, and are worked in London; yes."

"Do you know of any one of them that you could suspect of such a thing as that?"

"I could suspect all of them, but there is not one that I would give the credit to for the daring, the ingenuity, and the skill with which everything connected with this affair has been worked."

"Yet, over here, the same men who are interested in the affairs of the Di Giovannis are also professional kidnapers," said the detective musingly.

"Probably as a side issue; to obtain money for carrying on their other affairs; or, what is more likely, for revenge," replied Pettus.

Nick Carter lighted a fresh cigar after passing the box to his friend. Then he said:

"Pettus, in every walk of life, there are always two men so differently constituted that one of them becomes particularly expert, where the other one leaves off. A lawyer who is excellent in the preparation of a brief, could not earn his salt before a jury, or in the trial of a cause; a good trial lawyer, is, as a rule, no good at a brief. Now you and I bear something of that relation to each other. You are three times as thorough in all the preliminary work that you do as I would be. I am in the habit of taking a good deal for granted, and in plusing two and two. You never plus anything that you can't see and understand—but you run up against a brick wall, or a blind alley, after you have done with the features of addition. See what I mean?"

"Yes; and you are right about that."

"Your very thoroughness in the case in hand, in tracing those financial affairs over there, and in finding out about the duty on the diamonds, I should not have taken time to investigate; I would have depended rather upon the grand result."

"Just what are you getting at?" Pettus asked.

"This: You have convinced me of something that I confess I doubted before."

"And that is——"

"That the fortune is hidden over here."

"Oh."

"And that it is hidden in that cavern."

"Maybe so; although I should want to be convinced that the girl's father was in much closer touch than he appeared to be with the society he feared so greatly, before I quite accepted that, you know."

"'Under their noses,' you know, Pettus."

"Yes; don't I know. I have repeated that expression over and over to myself so long that the rumble of street noises sings it to me. Under their noses; under their noses; under their noses. What does it mean?"

"It means that the stuff is hidden under their noses, of course."

"I know that. But how? Where?"

"Where, indeed, if not in that cavern?"

"Then, according to what you have done already in that direction, there is about as much chance of our finding it there, as——"

"As he probably had, in the beginning, of successfully hiding it there," the detective interrupted; and the inspector ejaculated:

"Huh!"

"'Under their noses,' the detective repeated. "Where they were in the habit of congregating at times; where he would be least expected to conceal anything; where he could not go often, and yet where he was in the habit of going when he had an opportunity; where the men of that society would least suspect such a thing."

"Perhaps so," said Pettus.

"Where did you search, over there in London, that would answer to the description, 'under their noses'?"

"In the bank; in his home; in his private office; everywhere that I could think of. I even sought for a dummy whom he might have paid well to keep an account for him, in his own bank."

"Yes; I thought of that; but I dismissed the idea. It was too risky. He had to have a place where there was no risk, and which could be reached, after he was dead, with as little effort as possible, by his daughter."

"Surely you do not include that cavern in that category, do you?" exclaimed Pettus.

"Why not?"

"From your description of the place, I should suppose that it is exceedingly difficult to get at, particularly for a woman."

"Not at all difficult, if one knows how to do it; and again, that letter that contained the key to the hiding place, would have instructed her thoroughly, not only how to find the hidden fortune, after she had found the place itself, but it would have done the still more important thing of telling her when to go there."

"I see. Perhaps you are right. I wish we could find that letter."

"Yes. There wouldn't be anything left to discover, then, only the fortune itself."

"But the letter is probably destroyed."

"I don't think so."

"No?"

"No; for the reason that those fellows never do things by halves; they go the whole hog or none."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that the presence of the letter in the satchel, even though they could make nothing of it, convinced them that it meant something that did not appear on the surface. They would not destroy such a letter, even though it meant nothing to them. They would retain it, with the idea that it might have a meaning later on. The letter is in existence, somewhere, yet, I believe."

"Then that fellow at the bank has it."

"No; I do not think so. He is—and was—only an agent; not a principal."

"Then we can have no idea who has got the letter, now."

"Only one idea about it—which may be true, after all."

"What is it?"

"The man who came over in the ship with Carlina—with his wife as company; who gave his name as Monsieur Malet. He had to do particularly fine work. He had to direct affairs. His was a work of responsibility. He was doubtless one of the leaders in that society. He probably had the letter with him all the time, and was waiting only until Carlina was safely in his power, to ask her to read it to him, and to watch her while she did so."

"Then, why wasn't the letter shown to her, while she was a prisoner?" demanded Pettus.

"First, although she was their prisoner, she was not in their power; she kept them at a distance with her gun, that you gave to her; second, if it were placed in her hands, under those circumstances, she might have destroyed it; and third, something may have happened to Malet, to prevent him from going to the cavern, while Carlina was a prisoner there."

CHAPTER XI.

NICK CARTER DEVISES A PLAN.

"Carter," said the man from Scotland Yard, as they were on the point of parting that same evening, for the night, "I want you to let me do something on my own hook, to-morrow."

"Sure thing," replied Nick, laughing. "What is it?"

"I want to visit that cavern—and I want to go there alone," was the reply.

"All right."

"You have been there half a dozen times already, and you have searched it thoroughly. I haven't been there at all. It will all be new ground to me, so I will go at it differently than I would if you were with me."

"Naturally."

"I'll tell you exactly what I want to do."

"Well?"

"I shall pack one of my grips with a lot of food and drink; enough to last two or three days, if I decide to stay there that long, and I shall take it with me. Then I want you to have that Danny chap of yours drive me there in the motor, you know."

"Yes."

"You say that he can show me the way into the cavern?"

"Yes. He discovered one of the entrances to it himself."

"Well, he can do that much, and no more. I want him merely to take me there, to show me how to get into the place, and then to come away and leave me there, and I want you to leave me to my own resources."

"For how long?"

"Three days, at least. If I don't show up here by the middle of the fourth day, you can send after me."

"I'll go after you if you haven't returned by that time."

"Very well. That is agreed. You have no objections?"

"None at all—particularly as I had decided upon an entirely different course for to-morrow. But you will want to know about the working of that trapdoor under which——"

"No. I don't want to know anything about it at all. I want to find it all out for myself. I am even sorry that I have the advantage of knowing that it is there; the trapdoor, I mean."

"Oh; all right. Don't you want to know about the secret entrance through the face of the cliff?"

"No. Nothing only what I have said."

"Very well."

"I would like to get started so as to arrive at the cavern as soon as it is light," said the inspector; "and if you will have the grip packed with food——"

"I will have Mrs. Peters attend to that at once; and she will use a small hamper that Danny can carry to the entrance to the cavern for you, which you may leave there, when you are through with it. Danny will have it in the car, ready for you, in the morning."

"Good. Good night, then."

That night, before Nick Carter went to bed, he bathed himself in a liquid that resembled ink, as one looked down upon it in the tub; and he did no scrubbing; he merely laid himself down in it and soaked for a while, as he would have expressed it.

When he got out of the tub he used no towels, but went into his own room and exercised with the Indian clubs, naked as he was, until he was dry. Then he went to bed, and to sleep, forthwith.

In the morning, when the sun was rising, he looked at himself in the mirror and laughed aloud, as well he might have done.

His skin, even to his scalp under the hair, was dyed a swarthy hue—exactly the hue of the skin of the average Sicilian, in fact; and his hair was darkened by several shades, also; but not sufficiently to satisfy him, for he applied another and a darker dye to it before he dressed himself, and waited for it to dry thoroughly.

After that he made careful selections from his wardrobe, and proceeded to dress.

When he rang the bell for Joseph, the latter stared at him.

"How do I look, Joseph?" he asked.

"Well, sir, I thought I knew most of the disguises you put on, but that one would have beaten me altogether. It is simply perfect. Of course, you look like yourself, if one knows that it is you, but not at all like yourself at that, sir."

"Thank you. Have Mrs. Garvan and Miss Di Giovanni gone downstairs yet?"

"Yes, sir; they are in the breakfast room, now. Mr. Chick is waiting to see you before he goes in to his breakfast."

"Send him here, Joseph; and Patsy also."

A moment later:

"Well, Chick? Good morning, Patsy? What did you dig up yesterday?"

"Nothing," was the reply from each.

"Well, let it go at that, for the present. I have other work for you to-day. I want both of you to go to your rooms, as soon as you have had breakfast, and make up as Italians—as much unlike each other as possible; and not at all like me, either of you."

"Yes," said Chick.

"I want you each to look like young fellows who have been in this country for some time, and who have been moderately successful since you came. Fairly well-dressed, and with a good smattering of the Eng-

lish language. You can both speak Italian very well indeed, and you both have the accent down fine, when you wish to imitate an Italian talking English. Are you on?"

"Yes," they replied together.

"I am going to take Carlina out with me when I go; or, rather, I shall have her meet me outside, for I shall leave the house by the passage through the block."

"And what are we to do?" asked Patsy.

"I am coming to that. You are to follow us, when I have Carlina with me. You are to let it be quite apparent to any one who happens to be watching that you are keeping us in sight, too. I am going to try a new dodge in this game."

"Are we in on it?" Chick asked.

"Yes. Of course. I shall take Carlina to different places in the city, where she will be seen by her own countrymen—if you could call her an Italian, seeing that she was born and reared in London.

"But her personality is a marked one among a certain few of her countrymen now; among the members of that society of which her father was a member. Somewhere in the city we know that there are at least four men who have seen her, and who know her for what she is; men who know about the hidden fortune, and who believe that she possesses the secret of its hiding place. I refer to the four whom she saw while she was at the cavern, and who were not captured there."

"I know," said Chick.

"Also, there is no doubt at all that there are many more who would know her by sight—including all the members of that society, in this country, and we cannot even guess how many there may be of them."

"I don't suppose that the four you have mentioned are the only ones who knew about her imprisonment in the cavern," said Patsy.

"No; doubtless the entire society knew about that."

"Do you suppose they know that she has been rescued?"

"Without a doubt. When those men we captured there forgot to tell us about her, they probably had good reason to suppose that she would not starve; doubtless they believed that others of their society would go there after her."

"And you mean that that has happened, and that they know that she has been rescued?"

"Why, lads, there isn't an Italian of that class in New York now, who does not know the story of the Bufonti children, and how they were saved from starving by Nick Carter. Such things travel rapidly among that class of people; and, of course, it is also known that a young woman was rescued at the same time."

"Well, then," said Chick, "if to-day you are seen, even in that disguise, with her on the street, won't it be assumed at once that you are Nick Carter, and that you have got her out with you as a decoy?"

"Splendid," said Nick. "Of course that will be the first thought; and that is just what I want them to think—until they have had opportunity to convince themselves of the contrary."

"I don't think I catch on," said Patsy.

"The first idea that they will have, if any of that particular lot sees us on the street together, which I hope will be the case, is that I am Nick Carter, and that I have taken her out as a decoy, as you say; but if they trail along after us, all day, as they will do if we are seen at all, they will decide that they were mistaken about that, for she will leave me after a while, and then I shall go it alone. But never mind that part of it. It is what you two are to do that interests us now."

"Yes."

"You are to keep us in sight, together or not together, as you choose to be. But you are not to lose sight of us."

"No."

"It will be your business to see everybody who sees us, and who appears interested in us; it will be your business to keep close enough to Carlina, after she leaves me to return here, so that no harm can befall her—for harm will befall her if you do not, and that is the very danger that I wish to bring about."

"You think——"

"I am certain that if any of that particular group of men who are interested in the hidden fortune, happens to see Carlina on the street to-day, and alone, an effort will be made to get her again into their power. That is where you two must act."

"I understand now," said Patsy.

"You are not only to protect her—and I shall hold you both responsible for her safety after she parts with me—but you are to use any such opportunity that may occur, to get after any one of the men who may have been interested in her. The whole thing, in a nutshell, is this: In order to win out in this case I have got to capture one of the members of that oath-bound society; I have got to get hold of one of the higher ones, if it is possible; I have got to get my prisoner, secretly, and without the knowledge of the police, so that I can bring him here and make him talk."

Patsy whistled; then he grinned.

"The 'torture-chamber,' eh?" he asked; and Nick nodded.

"That's all," he said. "Be ready to go out when I do, and wait somewhere in Madison Square until you see Carlina and me together."

"Maybe you won't attract attention in the streets in that rig," said Patsy, with another one of his broad grins.

"I expect to do so. That is what I wish to do. Now go to your breakfasts, and send Carlina to me as soon as she has finished."

"Aren't you going to eat anything yourself?"

"You bet; presently."

It was several minutes after that before Carlina appeared, but when she did, she uttered a cry of amazement, and exclaimed:

"Why, Mr. Carter, only for the costume you are wearing you look very much like that man Malet, who came over in the steamer with me."

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN THE LIGHTS WENT OUT.

We need not deal with the further arrangement of the detective's plans for the day, and possibly for the evening following it also, because the reader has been enabled to surmise from what has already been said about what those plans were. There is only one point concerning them that need be enlarged upon just here.

That remark that Carlina made to him when she entered the room, both interested and surprised him.

It was interesting because of the resemblance she had caught at once, to that Monsieur Malet of the steamer, and of the automobile; and surprising because he had had no thought of the man when he was making himself up as an Italian.

True, Carlina had described the fellow to him, but the description was of the sort that would have fitted any well-dressed Italian, walking along the street—for she had said that Malet looked more like an Italian than a Frenchman—which he claimed to be.

"Look again," he said to her, "and tell me if what you said is literally true."

She did look again then, and closely, hanging her shapely head a little to one side to study him; and at last she answered:

"N-no—and yes, too. You look like him, and you do not. There is a strong resemblance, at first glance, which disappears as one looks more closely. You have caught something of the expression, I think, without having the features or the contour of the face."

The detective nodded appreciatively.

"I understand," he said, "and it is well."

Then he told her exactly what he wished her to do, asking if she had the courage to carry out the plan to the end, and she assured him that she had indeed; and then he gave up another half hour in instructing her thoroughly in the part she was to play, if opportunity offered; and then they went out—not together, however, although he overtook her just as she was crossing into Madison Square.

When he did that he saw that Chick and Patsy were ready to take up their part of the work as he had instructed them to do; and so began the work of the day, which Nick hoped might result in something definite.

Later they passed through that particularly populous Italian quarter of the city which extends along First Avenue, above One Hundred and Tenth Street; they entered several of the shops and stores along it; later they took a car downtown and visited two of the other populous Italian sections; late in the afternoon they walked up Broadway together to Bleecker Street, and through Bleecker to South Fifth Avenue, and up that thoroughfare to the arch in Washington Square; then they crossed to Sixth Avenue and took a car which they left at Grand Street; and presently, at dinner time, they entered a restaurant which had been Nick's objective point all that day, because it was not only Italian in the operation of it, but was frequented by Italians of the so-called better class.

It was by no means the first time that Nick Carter had been in that particular restaurant, but he was not known now, when he entered; nor were the two other Italians, who came in soon after them, and seated themselves at a table near by.

And after those two came two more, whom Nick remembered to have seen along Fifth Avenue early that day.

Several times during the day he had thought that they had attracted the attention he coveted; but he had not been sure; and he knew also that neither Patsy nor Chick had been sure of such a thing, as they had followed doggedly all day, never once leaving the scent.

But Nick himself had not wished to appear anxious about whether he was being followed or not, for he knew that the men who were after him—if there were any at all—were the most cautious and skillful of their kind, and would quickly discover if he were suspicious.

Within the restaurant where he had now taken Carlina, he expected something to develop that would be of interest, either to himself, or, at least, to one of his assistants, for he knew it to be a veritable hotbed of scheming, and a resort for all sorts of Italians who wished to meet some of their countrymen.

Something did develop before the soup was cleared away.

A man who had been seated at one of the tables when they entered the place rose and threaded his way toward them; then he bowed, and said in Italian:

"Pardon me, but have I the pleasure of addressing Signor Pellucini?"

"No," replied Nick, in the same language, "I am not Pellucini. You have made a mistake."

"Please pardon me. The resemblance is striking; but I see the error now."

He bowed again and withdrew, and Nick, in a low tone, said to Carlina, in English:

"I wonder if by any chance that is the correct name of Malet, do you suppose?"

Carlina repeated the name over to herself thoughtfully; then she replied:

"I have heard the name somewhere; I do not remember where, but—— Oh, yes, I do remember now."

"Well?" said Nick. "Where?"

"It is a name that my father made use of inadvertently, that day when he came to the convent to see me. It is, I am sure. Yes; that is it."

"Just how did he happen to use it?"

"He said it in this manner: 'If Pellucini—if the society should find out what I have done, it would spell death for me, daughter.' Those are his exact words, for I remember them now, and their connection with the name."

"Then it is a thousand to one that the man who just spoke to us is a member of that society," said the detective. "Carlina, do you think that you could manage to be taken suddenly and violently ill, right here and that——"

He stopped abruptly.

For an instant he feared that she had been taken

suddenly ill, so pale had she become; but she had also reached under the table and seized one of his hands, and that was what interrupted his speech.

"The door; at the rear of the room; look!" she managed to whisper to him without a motion of her lips.

Nick was seated so that he could see that door out of the corners of his eyes, without turning his head, and he looked up just in time to see a man who was in the act of disappearing through it, and the door closed again, with the man at the opposite side of it.

"Speak naturally," said Nick, "and do not look in that direction. Smile while you talk, as if you were telling me something interesting—as it will be. Now, tell me about the man at the door."

"It was Malet," she said, with some excitement.

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure."

"Where did he sit before he went toward the door?"

"He did not sit anywhere. He came in through the door; he looked over this way, and then he backed out through the doorway again at once. It was Malet."

As if in confirmation of the statement, the man who had previously crossed the room to ask Nick if his name was Pellucini, left his table again and started toward that same rear door—but he was stopped by the proprietor of the place before he could reach it, and a conversation ensued which Nick could not overhear; but at the end of it the man returned to his table.

And then it was that Nick heard him say to his companion:

"I wonder if anything is the matter with my eyes. I see one man, and think he is Giuseppe Pellucini—and he tells me himself that he is not. I see another man whom I know to be Pellucini, I start toward him, the proprietor stops me, and tells me that it is not."

Nick, watching with all his skill, saw that the landlord had heard that speech, too; he saw him pass through that same rear door for a moment, and return, going straight to the table where the man who had recognized Pellucini was seated.

Then there was another low-toned conversation, at the end of which the man arose from his seat at the table and followed the proprietor through the door at the rear of the room.

"The plot thickens," said Nick. "It is time for you to go now."

"But I have not finished my dinner, and it is very good. I was hungry."

"Nevertheless, you must go, and at once. Pretend to be ill; that is what I was going to ask you to do, when that man appeared in the doorway. Can you manage it now?"

'How will nosebleed answer?"

"Perfectly well. Try it."

She clasped her handkerchief to her face and drew it away, looking at it in a startled manner. She shoved back her chair. She glanced at the handkerchief again, and rose to her feet.

The attention of others was attracted to her now, and they saw her bend forward and say something to her companion—to Nick; they saw him rise, go to her, and suggest something; they saw her nod, put her thumb into her mouth, and press it against the roof of it, and shake her head when she had done so; and then they saw her companion start to lead her from the room.

Just then it was that the proprietor ran forward again, gesticulating violently.

"The signorina has nosebleed," he exclaimed. "Come this way, please."

He seized her by the arm and had pulled her away out of the detective's immediate reach before Nick realized what he was attempting to do; and then, as Nick started toward them, a man at one of the tables thrust out a foot, and tripped him.

It might have happened to any person; even Nick was not expecting such heroic measures in such a place as that, and at such a time.

When the man tripped him he did it energetically, so that Nick was thrown bodily to the floor, and even as he struck it, the lights in the room went out, leaving the place in total darkness, for they were electric lights, and could be switched off at one point.

But if Nick Carter went down quickly he was on his feet again as quickly. He could not for long be unhorsed in that manner.

As he leaped to his feet he heard Carlina cry out, and so located her. Then he sprang forward in the direction he supposed she had been taken.

His gripping fingers seized upon a man's arm, but he loosened it, and slid his hand along the arm—and found that it was indeed the proprietor that he had grasped, and that the man was half dragging Carlina away.

Nick slid his hand backward again softly, without tightening his grip on the arm, thus giving the impression that he was a friend, and he glided along with them just one pace more, until he had had time to raise his right arm, while he located the jaw of the man who was trying to take Carlina away.

Other people in the room heard a smashing thud; then they heard the sound of a falling body, as the proprietor sank to the floor; but they did not hear the low tones of Nick Carter's whisper, as he said into one ear of Carlina:

"It is I. Let me pick you up in my arms."

He raised her from the floor, and started with her toward the front door of the place, when he felt that another person had found her, and probably, by the sense of touch, had guessed who she was. Then the low voice of Chick said:

"Carlina? It is I; Chick."

Instantly Nick passed Carlina into Chick's arms.

"Take her outside, Chick, and take her home," he whispered. "I will guard you to the door." And a moment later, just as Nick had passed them through a side door into the hallway, near the front of the building, the lights were switched on again, as suddenly as they had been turned off.

But it was a minute later, and much can happen in a minute of time.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAVERN'S SECRET.

Nick had already begun to work his way toward the rear of the restaurant.

He was convinced not alone by what he had heard since he had been in the restaurant, but by his intuitiveness as well, that Pellucini and Malet were one; also, that the man was making his headquarters in that place, and that the proprietor of it was associated with him in whatever he was attempting to do.

Nearly everybody in the place had remained seated and motionless when the lights went out, regarding it as an accident, and so it was that Nick had been enabled to do just what he had done; now, when the lights were turned on again, there was a chorus of catcalls and cries, mingled with laughter, because of the "accident."

But the noise was stilled when they saw the senseless form of the proprietor stretched upon the floor, and it was discovered, just as Nick Carter was in the act of stepping over it, on his way to that rear door through the partition.

A man, in whom Nick instantly recognized the person who had tripped him, was bending over the proprietor of the place, and Nick bent forward, seized him by the nose, and gave it a pinching tweak that brought a yell of rage and pain from the fellow; and then Nick gave him a shove which sent him sprawling across the senseless form of the proprietor.

Instantly the place was in an uproar, but already Nick had his hand upon the door at which he was aiming.

He pushed it open, passed through, and in attempting to close it again, discovered that another man was following; and he turned to discover that it was Patsy.

"Get outside, Patsy," he ordered. "Quick. Here; through the hallway. Find Chick and Carlina, and stay with them."

"You'll need me here before you get through," replied Patsy impulsively. It was a rare case indeed when he questioned Nick Carter's orders. "Besides, they are all right. Not a soul in the place knows that they have gone out of it. Let me stay."

"All right. Come on. Find me that fellow——"

"I know."

A door opened directly in front of them, and "the man" stood upon the threshold.

It was Malet, or Pellucini, or whatever his real name was.

He tried to dodge backward, and to close the door again, when he saw that he was facing men who were utter strangers to him, but with one leap Nick Carter reached him and seized him.

But the fellow writhed from Nick's grasp like an eel; a gleaming weapon flashed in the single electric light that the room contained, but before it could descend Patsy seized the wrist of the hand that held it, and twisted it from his grasp.

Then Nick Carter's fist fell for the second time that night, and this time, upon the somewhat prominent jaw of Signor Giuseppe Pellucini, who collapsed as limply as if he had suddenly ceased to live.

"Find the way out, Patsy; through the hall," ordered the detective, as he raised the fallen man in his arms as if he were a child, and bore him forward in Patsy's wake; for the assistant had lost no time in starting for another door than the one by which they had entered, and which they supposed to lead into the hallway, which extended through the building from front to rear.

The hall contained no light save a dim one at the extreme front, and Nick hurried his burden toward the door that opened upon the street.

"Here, Patsy," he directed, "take this fellow's left arm; put your own under it. That's the idea. We'll carry him along in this fashion until we find a cab. People will suppose that he is drunk. Now, quick. They will be after us like a swarm of bees in another minute. Close the door after you. It is on your side. Now."

They were upon the street. A corner was near to them, and they lost no time in getting around it. Then they hurried their burden along for another block, and finally propped him up in a doorway.

"Now run," said the detective to Patsy. "Find a cab or a hack quickly. I'll stay on guard. We've got to get this fellow to the house to make him talk."

But Patsy was already gone, and the fifteen minutes that the detective had to wait until he returned with a taxicab that he had found seemed about the longest fifteen minutes to Nick Carter that he had ever experienced.

But nothing happened, nevertheless, save that the man on the doorstep began to show some signs of returning consciousness, as they lifted him into the taxi.

"I'm Nick Carter," said the detective, to the driver of the cab. "Take us to my house in Madison Avenue." And he gave the number.

Once inside the cab he began, systematically, to go through the pockets of his captive, passing each article, as he found it, to Patsy, to stow away for safe-keeping; and then the captive regained his senses.

He tried to raise his hands, but discovered that they were clamped inside of steel manacles, and he uttered an Italian oath.

"Shut up," ordered Nick harshly. "You had better be saying your prayers than cursing. It is all over for you."

"Who are you?" the fellow demanded, and Nick could feel that he was trembling.

"I represent what you have the most reason to fear, Pellucini," said the detective; and then the inspiration came to him, and he added: "Where is that letter and the other papers that were in the leather bag at the convent? And the money?"

"Spare me," whispered the man, because he could not speak for terror; and Nick understood him to believe that he was in the hands of members of his own so-

ciety, who were seeking vengeance upon him for something that he had done, or had failed to do.

"Where are the papers?" Nick demanded a second time, in Italian. "Where is the letter?"

"The letter is here in my pocket. The other papers are in my trunk at my room," was the instant reply. "Where are you taking me? I have done nothing wrong. I tried to do my duty as I saw it. The girl Carlina——"

He stopped, and as Nick made no reply, remained morosely silent during the remainder of the journey to Nick Carter's house.

But it was evident that he knew the house in which Nick Carter lived, for he cried out suddenly when the cab stopped there, and struggled mightily to escape; nevertheless, he was carried bodily into the house, and to that certain padded room on the top floor, which the detective, at infrequent intervals, had occasion to use. There he was stripped, and everything was taken from him; a suit of pajamas were thrown to him, and he was locked up and left there.

Chick had already arrived home with Carlina, who was none the worse for her thrilling experience at the Italian restaurant.

While Chick and Patsy searched the clothing of the man upstairs in the padded room, Nick looked through the letters and papers he had taken from the fellow while they were still in the cab; and he found very quickly what he supposed to be the letter which contained the key to the hiding place of the fortune.

He called Carlina to him, and Adelina came forward with her. Chick and Patsy paused in their occupation to listen.

"Is that the handwriting of your father?" Nick asked the girl.

"Yes; oh, yes," she replied, with sudden tears in her eyes.

"Look the letter over and see if it answers to the description he gave you of the letter that he left in the leather bag."

She read from the letter in silence for a moment. Then she exclaimed:

"Oh, yes, there can be no doubt of it. He said it would mean nothing as I read it, and surely it does not refer to anything that I ever heard him talk about."

"Good," said the detective. "Now we will organize ourselves into a committee of the whole, and decipher this letter. You may each of you take a pencil and put down the words, as I call them out, beginning at the second word of the second line, the third word of the third line, and so on. I remember how you told me about it, Carlina. Now."

* * * * * * *

The following morning, soon after eight o'clock, Nick's biggest automobile drew up at the door, and into it climbed, one after another, Carlina, Adelina, Ida Jones, Patsy, Chick, and Nick Carter himself.

They were driven to the One Hundred and Thirtieth Street ferry, where the car was taken across to the Jersey shore, and thence Danny drove it straight to that great cliff over the Hudson River, beneath which the mysterious cavern was located.

They entered it by the old way, through the face of the cliff, after passing down the iron ladder to the lowered platform, and then Nick led the way back along the gallery, keeping a sharp lookout for Inspector Pettus, who should be there searching.

And the inspector was there, but not engaged in searching. Instead, he was seated beside the old wicker hamper he had taken there with him, munching at some of the food it had contained. He looked up with a grim smile, as they came upon him.

"You're a bally lot of bounders that couldn't wait for me till I got back," he said.

"We came in order to shorten your task," said Patsy, speaking up boldly. "The chief captured the cipher letter last night, and we have worked out the secret message it contained. The hidden fortune is here in this cavern, all right."

"Read it to me, Carter," said the inspector. "I'd like to hear it before we begin the search."

And so Nick took the extract that had been culled from the letter, and read it through slowly to the end; and, as he read, Pettus nodded understandingly from time to time; and when the reading was finished he said calmly:

"Entirely correct in every detail."

"What do you mean by that remark?" asked Nick.

"Look inside the hamper," was the reply; and Nick looked; then the others looked; and then they all turned and stared at the inspector.

The hidden fortune, with the gleaming jewels exposed to view, and the bank notes plainly to be seen, was inside the hamper that Nick had told Pettus he need not bring back with him.

"I say, don't gawp at me, you know," said Pettus, abashed. "Any little kid of a navvy might have found the stuff, dontcherknow. I stumbled upon it; no less. It was all in a hole directly under a small, flat stone down there, where the young lady was imprisoned; the stone that she used to put her candle on, when it was lighted, I imagine, from the candle grease upon it. I stumbled and fell down there in the dark and knocked the stone away. It was only an accident, you know."

THE END.

The next issue, No. 748, will contain "The Disappearing Fortune; or, Nick Carter's Fishline Clew." Once more the mysterious cavern, with which we have become familiar, figures in the story in a new and peculiar manner. The great society of blackmailers and assassins, which used the cavern in its business to such an extent, is found to be even more far-reaching than Nick Carter suspected; and Nick and his assistants, as well as Inspector Pettus, find a new line of work cut out for them which taxes all their combined skill and ingenuity. Out April 29th.

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